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DISILLUSION

A Story with a Preface

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES

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CHAPTER XVII

'On ne badine pas avec l'amour.'

THE Comtesse Diane has a maxim to the effect that when a man is in love he is always before his appointed time; that when he still loves he is simply punctual; but that when he no longer loves he is late.

Alec Watson was not aware of being in love, but he was at the point which effects punctuality, and at the stroke of four next day he presented himself at Celia's door.

She was in a low chair before a blazing fire, and a table was set with tea. On her lap was some knitting, which struck Alec at once as a curiously unfamiliar sign of domesticity in her, and one which to him was not wholly pleasant.

He would like to have forgotten she was married. In old days her hands lay idle, and the sight of them occupied in feminine needlework irritated him, and reminded him of the changes that had taken place in her life. After a few minutes' interchange of commonplace remarks about the coldness of the weather and the general gloom of the London atmosphere, Celia said abruptly—

‘Draw your chair closer to the fire, and give it a poke, will you? That is such an ugly grate and fireplace—it makes me quite ill to sit in front of it.’

‘You have taken this house furnished, I suppose?’ Alec asked, obeying her request and breaking up a block of coal as he spoke.

‘Oh, yes, for a year; hideous, isn’t it?’

She glanced round and made a grimace. He laughed a little.

‘ You are fastidious as ever, I see,’ he said.

‘ Do you call it fastidious to be dissatisfied with green glazed chintz and a blue carpet and faded pink wall-paper? Ugh!’

She shuddered, and threw herself back in her chair with a gesture of disgust.

‘ Didn’t you see the house before you took it?’ Alec inquired.

‘ No, I didn’t. Mark did ; he doesn’t know chintz from green baize.’

This was said in a contemptuous tone, and Alec looked at her with a curious expression. After a moment, during which Celia sat staring at the fire, her lips curled disdainfully, and her hands resting on her knitting, he said abruptly—

‘ What made you marry Sergison?’

‘ Because I wanted to, I suppose!’ she answered coolly.

‘ But why did you want to?’

‘ There was an excellent reason at the time

—I really forget now what it was. It is some time ago, you know.'

'Only eighteen months! It was a frightful shock to me.'

'Nonsense, men like you don't get shocks. You know that it is only the unexpected that ever happens.'

A pause, during which Celia slipped on to the hearth and began tapping the coals with a light poker.

He watched her with a growing sense of satisfaction at her restored presence in his sphere. She was as pretty as ever, and ten times more attractive now that she was, or ought to have been, morally out of his reach.

Suddenly she asked him, but without turning her head—

'And where is Judy Crosland?'

'There—just the same,' he answered absently.

‘And you go to Richmond balls with her still?’

He laughed a little.

‘No—I forgot what I was saying—she is married again, to a dark little Jew.

‘Oh! Then where is she, I mean in your life, under such altered circumstances?’

‘There’s not much alteration. She comes up to town sometimes to see her dressmaker and be photographed, and—well, I still take her round sometimes.’

‘Et monsieur?’

‘Stays at Bournemouth. He has lungs—and a temper.’

‘Oh, then it isn’t a three-cornered friendship?’

‘Do you mean a three-sided affair? Well, if I had to describe it geometrically I should say that the whole relation was a scalene triangle. I suppose you’ve learnt Euclid?’

‘Good gracious, no! talk English.’

‘That was the very purest English. A scalene triangle is one of which all the three sides are unequal. Do you understand now?’

‘Perfectly. She still runs after you, and her husband runs after her!’

‘Precisely. Now, what is your next interrogation, fair inquisitor? You always did turn me inside out, you know.’

‘What an idea! By the way, did you ever turn a pocket inside out?’

‘Often. Why?’

‘Because, then, you must remember how one corner of it always rolls itself round the thing you most want to get at.’

‘So it does. What do you particularly want to get at in me?’

‘Nothing specially, but I never succeeded in turning out all your corners yet. I don’t expect to.’

‘I give you free leave to try. I don’t

think I ever shocked you much, did I? although you used to abuse me a good deal, I remember.'

She took no notice of this remark, and remained silent for a few seconds. Then she said, resuming her seat and picking up her knitting again—

'What became of that other girl?'

'Isabel Harper, do you mean? She's there, large as life—feet rather larger if anything.'

'No, no! of course I don't mean her. I saw her yesterday. No, the Swedish girl—the singer?'

'Oh!—— What is it you want to know about her?'

'Where she is, for one thing; where you are with her, for another.'

'I'm not with her at all; she's in Paris. I wonder you didn't come across her.'

Celia had done so, but she wanted Alec's

version of the girl's reason for leaving London. She said nothing, and he went on—

‘She fell off dreadfully in her singing.’

‘And how about her English? Did you complete her education in that respect?’

‘Well, I hardly know; she picked it up very quickly.’

‘With the result I anticipated, I suppose?’

‘I really don't remember what that was. It was a very unpleasant result that occurred. I don't know that it's quite fair to tell.’

‘Oh, yes, you can tell me; we are such old confidantes.’

‘Are we?’ he stopped for a minute, and then said—‘Celia—I say, I suppose I can call you that just the same?’

‘Of course; why not?’

‘I thought perhaps that having married that kind of man——’

‘What kind?’ she asked sharply. ‘My husband is a better kind than you are, any way.’

‘That’s not saying much!’ he rejoined, rather contemptuously. ‘I never posed as a saint in old days, still less now.’

‘What did you mean, then?’ she said more graciously, and knitting very fast.

‘I meant that Sergison might object to any approach to familiarity between us, that was all.’

‘And you are so considerate to a husband always, aren’t you?’ she said, with a little disagreeable laugh.

‘I try to be, on my honour I do! I swear it!’

‘I would advise you to swear by something a little less rickety, Alec.’

‘Rickety! as my honour? Why? what are you insinuating now?’

‘Nothing, only I should just like you to give me your definition of honour.’

‘Honour?’ why that’s easy enough. Honour? wait a minute! let me see. I

should say honour was—well—not deceiving anybody ; acting fair and square — that's honourable conduct. And I'm sure I've always been honourable with every woman.'

' Even with Elsa Kronstadt ? '

Celia glanced up sideways at him, and he kicked the fender a trifle impatiently as he answered—

' Yes, hang it, even with her, and, Lord knows, I was worried enough by her. I told her—I always tell 'em all quite frankly—it's no good their falling in love with me, for I'm not susceptible, and I don't know what love is. If they will do it in spite of my warning, how am I to blame ? I can't go about snubbing and snapping at women to save them from their own silly selves. Besides, they don't want to be saved, they like it ; it amuses them.'

' How do you know ? A woman wouldn't tell you if you broke her heart.'

‘ Oh, wouldn’t she ! that’s a very favourite trick, pretending the heart is broken. A woman’s heart is the most brittle thing in creation, but also the easiest mended, so I’ve found.’

‘ And you really think it amuses a woman to have her heart played cup and ball with ?’

‘ Cup and ball ?’

‘ Yes ; tossed into the air and caught on a spike.’

‘ I tell you, Celia, I never do that ; I am quite honest with a woman always.

‘ But, still, you can’t deny that if any woman is at all nice to you, you are perfectly ready to be even nicer to her. If she holds out her arms, you will rush into them on the slightest provocation.’

‘ Well, I should be an et-cetera’d fool if I didn’t ! I was very early taught two maxims ; one was, “ Never refuse a good invitation,” and the other, “ The only way to get rid of a

temptation is to succumb to it." I don't set up for being a teacher of morality; and so long as I don't pretend I'm giving more than I really am, where's the harm?'

'Oh, I'm not setting up as a moral teacher either, only it does strike me as such a rotten fabric of honour to swear by.'

'But why? for goodness sake do tell me.'

'Why, it is the most ridiculous, farcical humbug to pretend that you can ever play with fire without somebody burning themselves.'

'I don't know that I will allow that I ever do play with fire. I stir it about perhaps, and warm myself by it, but I always keep the guard on, and—cold water at hand to put it out if absolutely necessary, as in Elsa's case.'

'I call it playing with fire to carry matches about; to drop metaphor, Alec, I tell you plainly that you deceive yourself. You talk about being frank. Yes; then having told a

woman you can't love her, you go and make love to her. You say you don't mean anything, then you proceed to kiss her. Yes, you do that, because I know some one who told me all about you. You tell her you don't want her, but all the same you contrive to get her. Having got all you wanted out of her, you tire of the amusement, and then say with fine modern chivalry : "She did it! I was quite honourable."

Celia stopped, panting with unwonted excitement. She had met in Paris an intimate friend of Elsa Kronstadt's who had told her the story of Watson's behaviour to the girl. How he had taken every advantage of her *naïve* confidence in him, and had led her on from a pretended friendship to a still more pretence relation. That then, finding she meant more than he did, he, to quote his own phrase, had thrown cold water over her, and had nearly killed her sensitive artist's

soul with his sudden change of demeanour and studied neglect. And although Celia did not pose as a moralist, she chose to assume the *rôle* for the hour, in order to regain her position as mentor to Alec. The thought also maddened her that her fate would probably have been that of the Swedish singer, had she suffered herself to have made the smallest advance to him or given him a hint of her own feelings.

He was fairly amazed at her outburst. He was accustomed in old days to chaff from her, with being teased about his 'loves that were no loves,' his 'galanteries sans amour.' But there was a bitterness, a vehemence in her tone, for which he was unable to account, and it made him sit upright in his chair and look full at her. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and her eyes sparkled ominously.

'I say!' he asked, 'does Sergison often catch it like this?'

‘Don’t bring him into the discussion, please,’ she answered coldly.

He stared still more.

‘I beg your pardon!’ he said stiffly; ‘I forgot his moral altitude.’

They were both silent for some minutes. The big clock ticking heavily, and the frost-touched fire spitting and fizzing cheerily, were the only sounds in the room. Celia sat back in her chair, her hands resting idly in her lap, her eyes fixed on the fire.

Alec thrust his hands into his pockets and stretched out his legs in an attitude of sulky waiting.

He was the first to break the silence.

‘It’s bad form to quarrel, Celia. Don’t let us do it,’ he said grumpily.

‘It takes two to do that,’ she answered quietly, ‘and I never quarrel with any one.’

‘No? but you make it jolly difficult to be friends when you rail at one and shut

one up like you've been doing this afternoon.'

She made no reply, and he sat forward and laid his hand on her knee, looking fixedly at her.

'Look here,' he said in a voice that was not wholly steady, though he tried his hardest to control it; 'look here, Celia, I don't know why you're so awfully down on me, or why you should mount the high horse. I will own up in Elsa Kronstadt's case, and say I did behave rather like a blackguard, but she bored me so abominably—she was always crying, and jealous, and full of whims and fancies, and then she wasn't a lady, don't you know, and she did things which offended my taste; and—well, I'll say again I know I wasn't all that I should have been to her; but I've never done you a bad turn in my life, and you surely needn't take up the cudgels of a Swedish girl and spoil our long-

standing friendship on her account. Come now, I've been absolutely honourable to you, haven't I ?'

'Because I always kept you at arm's length,' said Celia, a little defiantly. She had recovered her self-composure now, and could argue again with him.

'Yes,' he said ruefully, still keeping her hand on her lap. 'That's the worst of it ; you have always been beastly cold to me. What a lucky chap Sergison is ! How did he manage to melt your Ici-ness ? I should like to know !'

'Oh, it wouldn't be any use for you to take lessons from him ; you couldn't come anywhere near him.'

'I'm quite aware of my exceeding inferiority, Mrs Sergison. I'm only wondering how he did it so cleverly.'

'There wasn't any cleverness at all about it. He simply fell in love with me, and he

married me. You would never have done either.'

'If I'd done one I should do the other! There, now, you'll believe in my honourableness perhaps. I've always told you I wouldn't marry until I genuinely fell in love.'

'And yet you are reproaching me for being cold to you! You would like me to have given you bread in exchange for a stone!

'I always had a "penchant" for *Vienna* bread,' he said pointedly; and in spite of herself and her irritation against him, she laughed a little at the allusion.

'Vienna bread is the most indigestible of its kind,' she said, gently drawing herself away from the contact of his hand, which was sending little electric shocks through her whole frame and making her feel uncomfortably uncertain of herself.

'But it's much the most appetizing!' he

said in a half whisper, bringing his head closer to hers.

She put out one of her knitting needles and playfully pricked his hand to make him withdraw it.

‘I shan’t!’ he said, laughing softly and taking hold of her hand with his other one. ‘I want you to tell me why you’re so hard-hearted to me. You know you are the only woman in the world who can say and do what she likes with me. You always have had more influence over me than anybody. I was perfectly miserable when you married. If Grandfather had not been alive, I should have asked you to marry me. I suppose you’ll think I’m raving and talking a lot of nonsense that I don’t mean, but I swear that I do mean it. I never loved any one before, but I love you, Celia. I do, believe me! I do.’

Her heart beat painfully, and the blood

surged to her cheeks and ears and made her feel odd and stupefied. She knew his nature too well to believe him, and so sudden an emotion could not be trusted to prove itself anything deeper or more lasting than the others which had preceded it.

In any case, it was both hopeless and useless for her to consider it. She was now Mark's wife, and though she was bored to extinction with her lot and sighed daily for the old excitement of conquest, she for once shrank from a declaration of love, knowing that her reason was not reluctance but reciprocity.

With a superhuman effort she controlled her desire to yield, and said coldly, playing with her steel needles and assuming an air of complete indifference,

‘You did not love me when you came into this room. I don't like mushroom growths.’

‘I did! I have loved you always. From

the very first I told you you were different from any other woman ; you must surely remember that !’

‘ Yes ! you may also remember that I told you that I was equally invulnerable.’

‘ I never believed you !’

‘ But you expected me to believe you !’

‘ Don’t, Celia ! don’t be unkind ! I know I have been a brute, but you can make me anything you like ! you know you can ! I don’t care how much you pull me to pieces, how much you abuse me ; you and I understand one another marvellously—we always did.’

‘ I don’t think you have even begun to understand me if you imagine I like you to make such a complete fool of yourself as you’re now doing, Alec,’ she said with some dignity, for she was a long way from being convinced that these were not his invariable tactics with every woman who thwarted him

ever so slightly. She knew that he lived for popularity, that the mere suspicion that he was not appreciated by any one with whom he happened to wish to ingratiate himself would make him passionately desirous of making a good impression. She was determined in her own case to test his sincerity pretty severely.

He flushed a little angrily, and dropping down on one knee beside her, he attempted to put his arms round her.

But she took hold of them and forced him back on to his chair.

‘No liberties, please!’ she said sharply; ‘we play fair—and with the same weapons—if I’m so different to other women, I’ll be so at any rate in this—that I won’t pretend what I don’t feel.’

‘Don’t you care for me a little bit, Celia?’ he said in a dejected tone and feeling really miserable, for he wanted her desperately now,

seeing that she was the first woman who had resisted him with any appearance of sincerity. He was quite accustomed to skirmishing and to pretences of rebuffs, but Celia was so cool and so decided in her manner he felt uncomfortable. Besides, he had a lurking suspicion that after all she might be in love with her own husband, in which case he knew he had no chance. It was true that when he came that afternoon into her room he was not consciously in love with her, and had, indeed, told himself scores of times that he was never likely to be, but her coldness and her indifference, added to the enhanced charm of her personal appearance, had roused all his most ardent feelings, and he was easily able to persuade himself that he actually loved her. What he meant was really that he only desired what he did not see his way to getting. And it was the novelty of the sensation that deceived him as to its nature.

In reply to his question, 'Don't you care for me?' she said, looking at him straight in the face, and without a quiver of her eyelids.

'I care for you exactly as much and no more than I always did—too much to see you behaving stupidly, not enough to make you do so.'

'Is there nothing I could do to make you fond of me?'

'My dear boy, I am fond of you; that's why I want you to be sensible.'

He looked at her for a minute to see if she was softening, for her voice was gentler and less snappish; but her eyes were hard and glittering, and her lips were compressed in a tight line which forbade hope. He heaved a deep sigh and got up from his chair.

'Good-bye,' he said abruptly, holding out his hand and looking down at her half reproachfully, half crossly.

'Are you going?' she said with a sur-

prised air. 'I think I heard my husband come in. Don't go ; sit down and talk to him for a little.'

'You are absolutely the most heartless woman I ever met,' he said angrily ; 'one might as well love a stone !'

'So I told you long ago ! Now perhaps you'll believe me, and have some remorse for other women,' she said, laughing triumphantly, for her love was of the kind which can rejoice to see another's suffering if it was merited, and in his case she knew that it was.

'Damn other women !' he began petulantly, when the door opened, and, as Celia had expected, her husband entered.

He looked rather surprised at finding Alec, for Celia had not told him of the probability of his calling, but he could afford to forget old jealousies and to welcome any friend of his wife's. He shook hands cordially with Alec, and said genially,

‘Don’t let me drive you away, Watson. What are you doing now? Your grandfather is dead, I hear. Are you still in business?’

‘No, I’m not in business now, Mr Sergison,’ said Alec, in a surly, abrupt manner. Then turning to Celia, he added in a conventional tone, ‘I will say good-bye, as I have an early dinner engagement.’ He took his leave, Mark accompanying him to the hall, and Celia heard the front door shut with a certain sense of relief. Her nerves had been at a state of high tension all the evening, and she wished Mark would not return to the drawing-room. She wanted to be alone and to arrange her ideas, which Alec had disturbed rather violently.

‘Well, little wife, and how are you this evening?’ said Mark, coming back to her.

‘Quite well,’ she answered in a matter of fact tone, and wishing he would not stroke

her cheek with his finger in a trick he had.

‘And how is the little one?’ he inquired.

‘Oh, all right. Will you have some tea? This is cold, but I can have some fresh made for you.’

‘No, thanks, dear; I don’t want any. Celia, sit here and let me give you an account of what I’ve been doing all day. I’ve something important to tell you, too.’

He pulled her down to his knee, but she gently withdrew herself, and sat on a chair close beside him. Ever since their marriage this sort of thing had gone on between them, he attempting a caress and she resisting it; and her chief quarrel with him was that he never seemed to be aware that she was resisting it, for he repeated the offence continually.

‘You look tired!’ he exclaimed, suddenly looking at her; ‘had Watson been here long?’

‘About half an hour, I should think!’ she replied indifferently; ‘he didn’t tire me particularly. We had a good deal to say. We were very good friends, you know, in old days. I hope you’ll be civil to him, Mark.’

‘Of course I will, though you know he isn’t much my style. But I want to tell you about my day. Don’t you want to hear?’

He pinched her cheek affectionately, and she put up her hand to push his away.

‘Yes,’ she said quietly; ‘tell me—where have you been all the time?’

CHAPTER XVIII

‘One often conceals from one’s friends that which one most longs to reveal.’

‘I HAVE been looking up Linda Grey,’ said Mark.

Celia frowned, and answered shortly—

‘What for?’

‘I was very anxious to see her again,’ he remarked, quietly; ‘and much shocked was I at the plight in which I found her.’

Celia made no comment, and he went on.

‘Of course I went to Anstey Buildings expecting to find her there, but her flat was shut up, empty, and unlet. A neighbour informed me that Linda had left it six months ago, and had gone to another part

of London. She gave me the address, and it took me some time to find, for it was in Islington, and I know that quarter so little. The street, too, was hard to discover, and nobody seemed able to assist me to it. I should think I was quite an hour wandering round about there, asking my way of every intelligent looking person I saw (of course I only came across one policeman), and receiving contradictory directions from each. At length, by a mere chance, I came upon Moorsom Street, and a more dreary, squalid row of houses I never saw. And I began at once to understand that the reason why poor Linda had moved was poverty—want of work, probably—but I wasn't prepared for what I actually found. To start with, the woman in Anstey Buildings had given me the wrong number, and it took me a long time to discover the right house. Nobody knew a Miss Grey, or,

indeed, who lived next door on either side, so I simply had to knock at every door until I came to the right one. And then you never saw such a virago as opened it to me. Evidently she was washing, for her arms were bare, and covered with soap suds, and the smell of steaming clothes pervaded the air. Four or five dirty little children straggled out to look at me, and a bigger girl, with her hair all over her eyes, and her frock hanging in a kind of ragged fringe round her ankles.

‘ Linda was always so tidy and particular about having clean surroundings, that it was quite a puzzle to me that she should be living in this sort of place.

‘ The woman stared blankly at me at first, when I asked for Miss Grey, and then jerked her thumb over her shoulder, and said she lived “up stairs.” I asked if I could go and see her, and she answered,

“ I s’pose so.” Then she gave her daughter, the girl with the wild hair, a violent push, and told her to go up and tell Miss Grey some one wanted her. But I thought I would make my own way to her, and I followed the girl up stairs to a room on the second floor, where she said Linda was lodging.

‘ I knocked at the door, and Linda opened it, but such a ghost of a Linda, Celia, I fairly started. So did she when she saw me, and she gave a little cry and almost fainted, poor girl. She was so terribly reduced from actual want, and I was shocked at her appearance and her general condition. Her room was destitute of everything but the barest necessities. She had sold every single possession of any value whatever, and the saddest thing of all was that she had been forced to part with her type-writer, which was her one hope of subsistence. She

was as brave as ever, and I dragged her history from her bit by bit; but what she has suffered no one can guess, unless they saw her pinched, starved, white face, and the look of despair and hopeless misery in her eyes. They haunt me still !’

He stopped for a moment, and passed his hand over his eyes in recollection of her. And Celia said, impatiently—

‘What a disagreeable story, Mark! Do cut it short.’

He looked pained at her tone, but resumed his narrative.

‘Poor Linda!’ he said, feelingly; ‘poor, brave Linda! She was so unfeignedly glad to see me; but you can fancy, Celia, how I reproached myself, and her too, for my ignorance of her need of help. I asked her why she never wrote to me for money, and her reply was characteristic—“I could not live on charity,” she said.’

‘Proud people like that deserve to starve,’ said Celia, in the same tone, and added, ‘I do hope, though, Mark, you won’t saddle yourself with this girl, for our expenses are quite heavy enough now without incurring fresh ones.’

‘My dear girl, I certainly could not allow an old friend and comrade like Linda Grey to starve while I have sixpence to share with her. And I was just going to tell you the rest—let me finish, Celia.’ He spoke in a decided tone, which she could never resist, though she always resented.

‘I listened to her account of herself, and how she had sunk so low, and as, obviously, the immediate way to help her was to give her some food, I proposed that she should come out with me to find some sort of eating-house. She hesitated in what I thought an unaccountable manner, and declared she could not eat anything. Would

I send her in some milk? She would rather have that than anything. But I could not do that. I wanted to give her a good dinner, and get her warm, too, for, of course, she had no fire. You can imagine how awfully cold her miserable room was. At last she confessed that she could not go out with me, for she had no jacket to wear, and only the thin shoes she had on. I made her give me all her pawn-tickets——'

'*Pawn-tickets!*' cried Celia, interrupting; 'how dreadfully low!'

Mark took no notice, and went on.

'I took them all, and redeemed everything she had parted with. I bought some brandy, and other things to eat, and I wanted to bring her straight off here to be properly cared for, but nothing would induce her to come until I had told you first, and had received your sanction. I

assured her it was not necessary ; that you were far too kind-hearted and generous to object ; and I was right, little woman, wasn't I ? You will have Linda here for a time, won't you ? Just until she can get up her strength a little, and we can find work for her. I have already thought of a plan which may do ; I want some translation work done very much, and have really no time to do it myself. Linda is—'

Celia had not replied at once, through speechless amazement at the proposal, but now she said, vehemently—

'It is quite out of the question. I can't have that girl here.'

Mark looked at her with blank astonishment, for he had not thought it possible she should refuse, especially after hearing Linda's pitiful tale.

'But why ?' he asked. 'What can be your reason ?'

‘Every reason!’ she exclaimed, impetuously. ‘Every reason. You know I never could bear her. You remember that day I came to tea with you, before we were married, how horribly rude she was. How much I disliked her then; and she hated me, too, you know that!’

‘But now, Celia,’ remonstrated he; ‘now, surely things are different. She would be so grateful and glad to be here—if you only saw where she was now living, the dirt and noise, and squalor of it; if you had seen her poor, starved face, her large, hollow eyes, her—’

‘That is just what I don’t want to see!’ Celia cried, passionately. ‘I hate poor people—and wretched ones—you know it, Mark. And I couldn’t stay here an hour with a spectral woman haunting me all day, and watching what I did, with her cold, disapproving eyes.’

‘ You are prejudiced and unreasonable,’ he retorted, with unwonted sharpness.

‘ Very likely,’ she returned, biting her lips with vexation ; ‘ but if you have Linda Grey here, I shall leave the house.’

‘ You object to her coming to stay ? or to see me, or to work for me, do you mean ?’

‘ To stay, I meant ; but I can’t see why she should come here at all. I can do any translating for you. You never make use of me. I am quite as able to do it as that woman.’

‘ I know, I know,’ he said, quickly ; ‘ but, Celia, you have never offered before.’

‘ I am offering now.’

‘ Thank you ; but I would rather you offered your hospitality to Linda.’

‘ I daresay you would, but I am not going to. I will be mistress of my own house.’

‘ Celia !’

‘Yes. I suppose you will say you will be master, and defy my wishes.’

‘Celia!’ again he remonstrated in a pained voice, ‘my dear, don’t let us talk as if our interests were separate. It is never a question of master or mistress. Of course if you very strongly and absolutely object to allow Linda Grey to come as our guest for a time, until I can arrange something else—if you don’t see that you are placing me in a very awkward and unhappy position with regard to her, and can be satisfied to refuse me this request, of course I can say no more. You know in what light I regard married life, and how all-important it is to me to live with you on terms of perfect understanding and confidence; and though I am deeply disappointed at your decision, I shall respect it, and explain to Linda that I must make other arrangements for her.’

Celia looked a little bit ashamed of herself, and said meekly—

‘And you’ll make her hate me more than ever, I suppose? What are you going to do for her?’

‘I can’t decide all in a minute,’ he replied, wearily. ‘I shall have to think it well over.’

He turned away to leave the room, and Celia, in a sudden impulse, caused partly by jealousy, partly by remorse, went up to him and laid her hand on his arm lightly—

‘Do you think me very horrid?’ she said, looking up at him with her childish blue eyes that were yet wholly un-childlike.

He bent his head and looked down into them for a second earnestly. Then he said gently, but with a sad note in his voice—

‘I think, dear, you will be sorry by-and-by.’

She drew back quickly, disappointed that he did not say something more ardent and flattering. She wanted petting, not patronizing.

With an impatient shrug she said briefly—‘Sorrow is for fools who don’t know their own minds,’ and then left him.

As Mark had promised to return to Linda that same evening, he was obliged to make all haste if he was to respect his wife’s dinner hour. He took the shortest route he knew, and as he went along he pondered over the difficult situation in which he was placed. He felt it was an awkward matter to explain to Linda Celia’s objection to having her as her guest, and as he drew near to his destination, the task appeared to grow into alarming dimensions.

But although Linda lacked a woman’s grace, she possessed all the woman’s instinct to detect any embarrassment, and as soon as

Mark re-entered her room she guessed what he had to say.

Instantly she determined upon her own line of action, and before he had time to begin an apology, she said quickly—

‘I have quite decided to stay on here for the present. It is most kind of you to come back to fetch me, but indeed it will be best for me to refuse your wife’s kind invitation.’

Relief and surprise at her astuteness deprived him for the moment of speech, and she continued—

‘You know what my ideas are about servants and luxuries, and so forth. Your wife would not understand them, and probably I should misunderstand hers. It would be disagreeable for us all. I am really quite happy here. They are very good, hard-working, honest people, and the man is quite an ally of mine, when he is sober. If only I could get work I should mind nothing.’

‘ But it is so far away, Linda,’ he objected; ‘ do let me take a room for you somewhere else. Look here, I have a plan which you must not oppose this time. I told you this morning of my engagement as editor of the *Comet*. Well, it is the new organ of the Labour party. I want some one in the office to revise copy and to take down shorthand notes for me. I often want translations made quickly and off-hand of letters and articles that I get from all quarters of the globe. Come and be my “sub.,” Linda. No one will suit me so well as you. I am not offering it to you for your own sake half as much as for mine. I don’t know any man that could combine as much as you do for general capacity and quickness of perception. Now, don’t refuse, or we really shall quarrel.’

He turned away and began pacing the room, his eyes averted from hers as he added, ‘ You are probably right about wishing to

live alone. My wife, you know, has different notions to '—'ours,' he was going to say, but checked himself, 'and said, 'yours on most everyday matters, and—well—it would be more comfortable for you to have your own home, only I don't like this place for you ; it isn't healthy to begin with. Why not go back to Anstey Buildings? you will be able to afford it. Of course I shall insist on your taking the same salary as if you were the man I should have to get if you were not available, and besides, you cannot forget how much in your debt I am still for that play. Why, Linda!'—and here he stopped in front of her and looked into her eyes—'I owe everything to that play ; it brought me into notice, gave me chances I never should have had otherwise.'

'It introduced you to your wife,' was in Linda's mind, and she wished she might say it just to see what he would answer, for she

was puzzled about his marriage, and could not be sure if it had been a success or not. His face told her he was disappointed, unsatisfied, unhappy, but he had apparently married with his eyes wide open, so where had been the illusion?

His proposition was very tempting, and she was very lonely and in need of companionship of a more refined and intellectual kind than she had lately had. She was heartily democratic in her tastes, and genuinely considered her present surroundings to be theoretically congenial to her. But it was just beginning to dawn upon her that squalor and dirt, as well as luxury and riches, had their drawbacks, and that the utter absence of all the accompaniments of culture made life very sordid and uninteresting.

For Linda was essentially a non-domestic woman. She detested cooking or washing, and even needlework was distasteful to her.

Minutiæ were not her forte, and to be a good housekeeper one must have a quick eye for detail.

Since her extreme poverty had overtaken her, she had been forced to spend hours of her time on work of a far more menial nature than had been her lot in Anstey Buildings, and she found it very irksome. Mark's proposition was intensely tempting, and until he made it she scarcely realised how much he had taken with him out of her life. To be again his assistant, to have the daily pleasure of his intercourse, filled her with happiness even to contemplate. She was, with all her ideals of communism, like most women, exclusive in the bestowal of her confidence, and intensely reserved with others of her own sex. Sympathetic to ideas, she could not comprehend the moods which some ideas produce in women, and their sensitiveness to traditional customs at all times irritated her.

Mark had been her only intimate friend, and the loss of his intercourse had robbed her of her sole luxury.

Her eyes therefore lit up with unfeigned pleasure as she frankly and without hesitation acceded to his request, and finally yielded to his urgent demand that she should return forthwith to Anstey Buildings.

They talked for some time longer over the proposed arrangements, and discussed several points of interest in the coming work.

But by a tacit understanding the subject of Mark's domestic life was ignored.

CHAPTER XIX.

‘One’s self-satisfaction is an untaxed kind of property, which it is very unpleasant to find depreciated.’—GEORGE ELIOT.

It would be difficult accurately to describe Alec’s feelings when he left Celia that February afternoon.

It was true, as she had shrewdly perceived, that when he entered her house he was not consciously in love with her, neither was he when he left her presence. It was himself always that he loved, and Celia only in her desirability to himself that he cared for. She suited his fastidious taste, and they understood one another marvellously well. All her petulant criticisms, all her protestations against his ordinary conduct towards other women, were merely so many added charms

to her already piquant self. It would have been poor sport to capture a tame bird. He loved to see it wild, to pursue it, and to feel it flutter in attempted resistance in his hand ; he would not mind even a few pecks from its sharp beak so long as in the end it became his own possession and plaything. But the harder the capture the more urgent, on his part, was the need for skill, tact, and patience. Celia was so shrewd, and had such penetration, that it would be fatal to allow her to detect any lack of genuineness in his professions of love for her.

This, after all, would not be a very difficult task, for he imagined that no woman could be proof against such ardour as he was capable of throwing into his wooing, least of all one who inspired to so great a degree as Celia all the incentives to passion in a man like himself.

It was too early yet to form any distinct

idea of his intentions. He was too bewildered with the suddenness of his emotions to see clearly whither they were leading him. Of Celia's conventional duty towards her husband he had no thought. Nothing ever existed for Alec except what he chose to see, and Mark only appeared to him in the light of a surmountable obstacle. Had he been King David, he would have placed Mark in the forefront of the hottest battle. As an Englishman of modern date, he could sigh for the privileges of an Eastern potentate, and consign his enemy to an imaginary place of danger. Moreover, modern traditions required that he should show a courteous demeanour towards the said enemy, one of the unwritten laws of his country being, that to openly strike a foe is a prohibited assault, while to smite him in the dark is allowable.

His hatred to Mark was only secondary to his desire for Celia, but it almost equalled in

intensity the primary feeling. Living in a world where self-interest was the rule of life, and sentimentality passed for genuine feeling, it was but natural that he should seek to turn all his emotions to his own best advantage.

He spent that evening wondering how he could ever have let Celia slip through his fingers; why, at any rate, he had not pledged her to wait until his grandfather's death should have set him free to marry whom he pleased? Finally came the all-absorbing thought—When should he see her again? This plunged him into his first genuine committal—a love letter. A seeming paradox, when, as a fact, his bureau was full to overflowing of women's letters to him, ranging in temperature from 'cool' to 'very warm.' He possessed a knack of writing with a sufficient suggestion of warmth to gratify a woman's vanity, without giving her

anything to satisfy her heart, should she by a rare chance possess one.

The Swedish singer had been the only episode which had been to his consciousness undertaken on her side in earnest, and which had ended disastrously on account of his inability to reciprocate her feeling.

But now he was in real earnest about Celia, and he wrote to her from his heart, atrophied organ though it was.

He took the letter himself to the post, feeling for the first time a kind of shyness of his servant. He dropped it into the pillar-box, and as he heard its light fall inside, his heart beat a shade faster, and he experienced a strange and unaccountable desire to have it back again. For an instant he stood staring vacantly at the red pillar with its 'V.R.' and its official tablet recording the hours of clearance; then the heavy, regular tread of the midnight policeman approaching, roused him

from his reverie, and he returned to his rooms feeling as if he had signed a cheque for a larger amount than he possessed, but yet ardently desiring the equivalent.

Celia had not gone through any such tumult of feeling.

She knew the man better than he knew himself. She gauged the depth of his emotions by the suddenness of their revelation, and she intended to put him to a more severe test before she yielded.

That she would ultimately do so she had no doubt, for at present her strongest weapon of conquest was her self-surrender.

When she received his letter, passionate with assurances of devotion and vehement in protestations of life-long fidelity, she smiled cynically, and immediately began to wonder how many other women had received similar assurances, and with what final results.

She pocketed her letter, and sat down calmly to her breakfast with her husband, discussing commonplace topics with apparent interest, while all through the meal her brain was busily planning how to see Alec again.

Mark informed her of the arrangement he had made with Linda, and she took it indifferently.

So long as she was not called upon to be civil to his friends, she did not care who they might be.

Personally she disliked Linda, and any undue exertion of her influence over Mark she should resent. Unless this happened, however, she did not object to her position in his office.

Later in the day she sent Alec a telegram telling him to meet her at the National Gallery at three o'clock.

He frowned when he received this command, for a public building did not suit his

mood, and he would like to have seen her quietly, and alone.

She kept him waiting nearly twenty minutes, for unpunctuality was a part of her tactics, and this ruffled his temper.

‘I am afraid I am a little late,’ she remarked, serenely smiling as she gave him her hand.

‘You are awfully late,’ he exclaimed sulkily, ‘and whatever made you fix this beastly place? Didn’t you get my letter this morning?’ he added, ‘and is this what you call a satisfactory place for a talk?’

She looked down at her muff, and stroked the fur the wrong way thoughtfully.

‘Would you have preferred the British Museum?’ she asked, in a provokingly calm manner, and then looking up hastily as he made no reply, she saw him flush to the roots of his hair, and his eyes sparkled angrily.

‘Is it possible!’ he began, but she checked

him, and laying her hand gently on his arm, she said softly,

‘Don’t be cross, Alec! I am only teasing. Of course we wont stay here, now we’ve met. I didn’t want you to come again so soon to Tite Street, that was all. Where can we go? It is such horrid cold weather. We can’t walk in the Park.’

‘You went to tea with Sergison in his rooms before you married him, Celia,’ he remarked tentatively, and she retorted sharply,

‘Yes, and I recollect your comment on that proceeding. You said, if you remember, that if I had been a married woman, it would have been sufficient reason for a divorce. I am married now.

She paused significantly, and he answered with some hesitation,

‘Divorces are not always bound to be formidable.’

‘You think not? You have had experience perhaps?’ she said quietly.

‘Celia! what an abominable suggestion.’

‘Which? Yours or mine?’

He coloured as he met her eyes fixed on him with an expression he could not quite fathom, and he felt impatient with her for fencing like this.

‘Yours, of course,’ he replied crossly, ‘I made none.’

‘Oh I beg your pardon,’ she said airily. ‘Then where shall we go?’

He opened his eyes rather wider, and caught his breath. ‘What do you mean, Celia?’ he asked hurriedly, ‘will you really come to my rooms?’

‘I never said so,’ she answered sharply; and then added decidedly, ‘Let us go to Charbonnel’s, they make decent chocolate, and it is horribly cold here.’ She shivered as she spoke, and drew her fur boa close round her throat.

‘No! no!’ he cried, bent on making her do as he liked to-day. ‘Charbonnel’s is impossible. We may as well stay here. Come to my rooms, Celia. What does it matter?’

‘Nothing to you probably,’ she answered with some scorn, and yet wishing she dared yield. ‘Of course you don’t mind if all London hears of it, but unfortunately, as I am married—I—well, I may as well remain so!’

‘But what I said long ago to you in a fit of silly jealousy—for I will own to having been jealous even then of Sergison—about what a married woman may or may not do, needn’t surely bind you now. Why have you grown so suddenly conventional, Celia? You used to defy social bugbears.’

‘So I should now if I wanted to,’ was her provoking response. And he could only shrug his shoulders, and say huffily,

‘Oh, I understand—thanks.’

‘What are you thankful for?’ she asked, laughing at his cross tone.

‘For your candour.’

‘Oh, I see!’

They walked slowly toward the door of the gallery, leaving unnoticed the masterpieces around them, and at the entrance, Alec felt desperately inclined to take his leave. In her present mood, Celia was impossible to understand.

He was more than half angry with himself for being so easily put out by her, annoyed to discover how much power over him she already had gained. It was uncomfortable, too, to feel under the domination of a woman’s capricious moods, and Alec could not stand being made uncomfortable.

‘Do be nice, Celia!’ he whispered, as they reached the door.

‘Do be sensible, Alec!’ she rejoined. ‘It

is really very stupid to quarrel over nothing. Let us go to Charbonnel's—after that you shall come and help me to choose a new umbrella. I always like a man's opinion on a matter of that sort, and you, poor rained-on-Englishman, ought to be a very good judge of umbrellas.'

Her light bantering tone half mollified him, and for the present he was obliged to be satisfied with her various suggestions for the afternoon's enjoyment. But the subject of his own letter was very absorbing to him, and later on, in the semi-public, sombre seclusion of Charbonnel's back room, he reverted to it, and asked her abruptly what she thought of it.

'In what way?' she asked him in return.

'In every way.'

'Well, you see, Alec, it is quite a long time since I had a love-letter, so I have rather forgotten what to expect; it struck me as being

very much like the others I have had. Did you think you were being very original?’

He pushed his cup away angrily and laid his arms on the table, looking straight at her with such an expression on his usually nonchalant face that in spite of herself she was startled, and exclaimed,

‘Good gracious, Alec! what is the matter with you? You look as if you could kill me. Are you so vexed because I don’t tell you your letter was the only love-letter I’ve ever had? Lots of men have cared for me quite as much as you imagine you do, don’t you know that?’

‘I don’t care about *other men*, Celia; you are always either throwing other men or other women in my teeth. If you treated them all as badly, as abominably, as heartlessly as you’re treating me, I’m sorry for them. Do you never give any one credit for being in earnest? If you’ve no heart yourself, at least

you might respect a fellow who is fool enough to show you that he has.'

Celia listened to this vehemently-given speech with her eyes down, and she replied, still without looking up,

'You have a great deal to do yet to convince me that you are in earnest; at present I should say you were only flirting.'

'Flirting! good heavens! And pray what proof do you expect me to give you?' he answered, in real dismay, for he felt powerless to persuade her if she now chose to misunderstand him.

Cecilia shrugged her shoulders.

'Oh, I can't say off-hand; you must be in some way different to what you are now.'

'Different? More demonstrative, do you mean? That is your fault for choosing this vile place instead of my rooms, which'—

'Which you had yourself, long ago, made impossible for me.'

‘Not impossible, Celia, only imprudent.’

‘Exactly ; it is the same thing.’

‘Why ? Why are you so prudent now-a-days ?’

‘I am married ; you seem to have forgotten the fact.’

‘Forgotten ? not likely. I can think of nothing else. I only wish you would forget it, and so give me a chance of doing so.’

‘That would be impossible.’

He glanced quickly at her to read her meaning better, but her face was inscrutable as ever.

‘Why ?’ he then asked, eagerly, ‘are you so absolutely devoted to your husband ?’

‘I can’t think why you should doubt it, my dear Alec.’

Again he searched her face for some hidden sarcasm in her words, and this time he fancied he detected a lurking smile in her eyes.

‘Well,’ he said, holding her gaze steadily, ‘if you were, I don’t believe you would be here now.’

‘Pray, why not?’ she said, liking his quickness of perception better than anything else he had yet shown her of himself.

Her eyes were undoubtedly softening, and the faintest suspicion of a blush was on her cheeks.

He could now afford to be a little bolder.

‘Because I think, Celia,’ he said quickly, ‘if you cared very desperately for your husband you would not have sent me that telegram after the letter I wrote you last night.’

‘Then you don’t believe that one can be fond of one’s husband and yet at the same time frightfully bored with one’s life.’

‘No, I don’t,’ he answered promptly.

‘You don’t know much about women, then,’ she said, laughing. ‘I am sure it is high

time I taught you a thing or two to enlighten your ignorance.'

'I know more about women than you give me credit for, Celia,' he persisted, ignoring her bantering toné, and retaining his belief that she would yield to him in time, and would confess to his power over her. 'And I am convinced that if your life bores you it is because you have not got the right sort of companion in it.'

'I believe that I am not the right sort of companion to Mark, and that is why we are both so intensely bored,' she said, changing her tone, and becoming suddenly confidential.

'Is he bored?' Alec asked in surprise.

'Oh, yes, of course he is. Why, you don't imagine, do you, that he cares for any of the things that amuse me, or that I am burning with zeal for what he calls the cause of Human Freedom? No! no! we haven't a single idea in common, not one; and yet he is devoted

to me, and'—after a slight pause—'and I respect and admire him very much.'

'Why on earth did you marry him? again I am obliged to ask this, Celia.'

'I told you yesterday, Alec. I really forget what was my reason.'

'Oh, nonsense! You must have been tolerably sure of yourself at the time.'

'Yes, at the time; but now it seems so long ago.'

He waited for a few seconds, and then said with some hesitation,

'Had I—had my apparent indifference to you in your time of trouble anything to do with it?'

She too hesitated before she replied; and when she spoke, her voice had not the ring of truth in it.

'None whatever. How could it?'

'I hoped—I mean I thought it might,' he said rather awkwardly.

‘In what way?’

‘Surely you understand what I am driving at,’ he said impatiently. ‘In plain English, if you will have it, if I had shown you at that time how much I cared for you, would you still have married Sergison?’

‘You never did care, though. It isn’t a fair question.’

‘Yes it is. Please to answer it.’

‘I should have wanted the same proof then that I want now.’

‘But you would have had it. I mean if I had asked you to marry me before Sergison did, would you have said yes?’

‘Why not ask me, if I had been offered the crown of England, would I have accepted it? The positions are equally unthinkable.’

‘How?—unthinkable. When I have told you a dozen times since yesterday that I was in love with you, that I am in love with you; that I should have proposed to you

if my circumstances had been different—
if'—

'If you had loved me, you mean, Alec. You are always more or less in love with somebody or other ; but you are more of a hypocrite than I take you for if you will pretend that your love of ease, and liberty, and society were not, and are not now, much stronger than any other feeling in your life.'

'What a detestable opinion you've always had of me !' he cried, nettled by her detection of his weakest point.

'It is the truth all the same,' she said with warmth, for she felt angry at having so nearly softened to the point of yielding before he had in any way satisfied her.

'Then we needn't stay here talking any longer, need we ?' he said coldly, and feeling, in very truth, as if he would like to take his final leave of her.

'No ; certainly we need not. I was just

thinking we had been here much too long,' she replied, rising as she spoke, and proceeding to arrange her veil before a mirror.

He appeared to be absorbed in brushing his hat, and then he sauntered to the counter and paid leisurely. When Celia joined him they were both outwardly as calm and composed as if they had been a married couple on terms of mutual toleration, though inwardly each was fuming against the other, and inclined to be passionately reproachful.

'I will leave my purchase of an umbrella for another day,' she said in a frigid tone, to which he replied in the same manner,

'As you please. I am at your service if you want my opinion.'

They walked a few steps down Bond Street in the cold, sharp air, which was welcome after the heavy, heated atmosphere of the room they had just left, neither speak-

ing again till they reached the corner of Piccadilly.

A woman accosted them with violets which looked fresh and smelt fragrant, and in a fit of sudden remorse, Celia hurriedly bought a bunch, holding it out to Alec.

‘Take them,’ she said in a rapid undertone, ‘for a peace offering ; it is silly to quarrel.’

Before he could reply she had, with characteristic impetuosity, hailed a passing hansom and sprung into it.

He had barely time to lift his hat before she was gone, and he was left standing there with one hand raised and the other grasping the violets, looking dazed and feeling bewildered with her rapidity of thought and action.

Nevertheless he went home comforted.

CHAPTER XX

‘Men make houses, but women make homes.’

IT was like new life to Linda to find herself at work again with so congenial a companion as Mark. It had been hard to her to succumb to an adverse fate, and to acknowledge her efforts beaten. But as she had left no stone unturned to find work, she was satisfied that her struggle had been a brave one, and that she was not to blame for her failure.

Mark had appeared on the scene at the very moment when she felt she had reached her final point of endurance, and she reluctantly confessed to a sense of relief on finding herself once more within the compact seclusion of her old rooms in Anstey Buildings.

Poverty and privation were too closely akin to be pleasant acquaintances. Squalor and discomfort were their attendants, and ill-health threatened Linda as a final element of misery.

Her friends at the Spade Club missed her from amongst them, but none of them guessed the true reason of her absence. When one evening she re-appeared, and took her accustomed part in one of the debates, they welcomed her with a cordiality that was free from curiosity, and her reticence on the subject of her recent non-attendance was respected with characteristic scrupulousness.

She threw herself with the greatest zest into the details of her position at the newspaper office, where Mark found his work considerably lightened by her strong, capable assistance.

The other members of the staff looked with scanty favour upon her, but the editor's

word was law, and his choice of subordinates absolute.

By degrees she won the respect of all with whom she came in contact, by her steady, single-minded devotion to her work, and insensibly the love of the office was raised to 'that Miss Grey's' standard of conscientious performance of duty.

Mark scarcely acknowledged to himself the satisfaction he felt at her co-operation, nor the difference made in his life by the presence of a sympathetic companion. He missed the mental intercourse less with Celia now that he enjoyed more of it with Linda ; but the subject of his private life was never mentioned by him, and Linda could only take his silence as in itself ominous of a discord he chose to ignore.

Celia took no notice of the new arrangement. She was too much engrossed in her own affairs to give it more than a passing

thought. She merely saw that since his return to London Mark had become more cheerful and talkative, and she supposed, vaguely, that the 'she-boy' had something to do with this change of demeanour. That such a fact was unaccountable only confirmed her growing conviction that her own marriage had been unaccountably strange.

A few days after the meeting with Alec, already referred to, she caught a violent chill, and for some weeks lay seriously ill. Mark was unremitting in his care and watchfulness over her, though it interfered greatly with his work. At this time Linda proved her value to him. She brought him his letters in the morning, and frequently she remained at his house for the greater part of the day, writing at his dictation, and thus leaving him free to wait upon his wife.

It was during these visits to his home that Linda discovered much that she would fain

have never known, and that Mark likewise would gladly have hidden from her. It was the discovery of all that he had to bear, which filled Linda with dismay and pity, and it required all the tact and wisdom on her part, of which she was capable, to conceal her feelings from him. She confined her presence in the house to Mark's study, with the exception of an occasional visit to the dull back room up stairs, called 'the nursery,' attracted thither by the perpetual crying of the Sergisons' boy. He was a weakling of a child, and Linda wondered that Mark felt no concern at his wretched appearance. He looked wizen, and had a pinched, old expression on his tiny face, that was as pathetic as it was unnatural. She imagined that Celia concerned herself about her child, and that the Frenchwoman in charge of him, who was both nurse and lady's-maid, could be trusted with the care of his health.

However, one afternoon some weeks later, when Celia was sufficiently convalescent to come into the drawing-room, and to receive visitors, Linda chanced to be in the house doing a translation which Mark had wished left there for his home revision. Having finished it, she went up stairs, according to her habit, to see the little Leo, and found him alone, crying in his cot, and in evident pain, for the cry was a wail of unmistakable suffering.

She bent down and took him into her arms, but he cried so piteously that she felt sure there was some serious cause for it. She remained a short time in a futile attempt to soothe him, and expecting each minute that Julie, the nurse, would return. At last the cries became so heart-rending that she determined to brave the mother's possible displeasure, and call her attention to the fact of her boy's apparent illness.

The two women had only once met since Linda had been to the Sergisons' house, and then but for a minute, when she had been called into Celia's room to receive some necessary instructions from Mark.

Celia had then treated Linda as a paid subordinate, with frigid civility bordering on condescension.

The recollection of this caused Linda to hesitate before intruding into the drawing-room. Outside the door she stood still, hearing voices within. Evidently Celia had a visitor. She would resent any interruption at such a moment. It was a man's voice talking, and for an instant Linda thought it might be Mark's, but a loud laugh which certainly was not his dispelled this idea, and she decided to postpone her communication, and to wait until Mark himself returned before making known her fears on the child's account.

While she was waiting irresolute whether to return to the nursery or not, she heard the front door open and shut, and Mark's well-known footstep in the hall.

Hastily running down to meet him, she beckoned him to come up.

'Ah!' he exclaimed, seeing her; 'that's right. I am glad you are still here. I was afraid you would have left. Is my wife down stairs this afternoon?'

'She is in the drawing-room,' Linda answered. 'Some one is with her—. But—Mark, I am disturbed about your boy; he is ill, I am certain. Come up and see him.'

'Leo! ill! What makes you think so? Have you not told his mother? What is the matter, Linda? Don't hurry up stairs without telling me more.'

'The child is alone,' she said, hastening up the staircase. 'You can hear him crying, poor little thing; he is in great pain.'

‘ But where is Julie ? ’ he asked, following her in a puzzled frame of mind.

‘ She is not with Leo, at any rate. And, said Linda, turning round and speaking impressively, ‘ it is my firm belief that she leaves the child a great deal more than you know. I often come up in the afternoons to the nursery and find Leo all alone. Sometimes he is in bed crying to himself. She is not a careful nurse, Mark ; of that I am convinced.’

‘ Wretched woman ! she shall go if she neglects the boy,’ answered Mark with decision. ‘ Yet my wife trusts her entirely.’

They reached the nursery, and Mark was as much distressed as Linda had been to see the child’s evident suffering. He took him up in his arms, and was startled at the sharp cry of acute pain that any movement seemed to produce. Accidentally he seemed to discover an attitude that relieved the excessive

distress, and after a little time the sobs grew less, and the little thing lay in a pitiful state of helpless exhaustion in his father's arms. For nearly half an hour Mark walked up and down the room with his light burden, conjecturing what steps to take next, Linda sitting by offering him her counsel. At length she felt obliged, on account of the growing lateness of the hour, to take her leave.

‘I wish,’ said Mark, as she left the room, ‘you would look in to the drawing-room as you pass and tell my wife to come up here.’

A look of demurrance showed itself plainly on Linda's face, for she felt instinctively that Celia would resent a message given through herself. Mark saw it, and decided to take the boy down to his mother; and hastily snatching up a shawl, he wrapped Leo in it and carried him carefully to the drawing-room.

Celia was half reclining on a sofa drawn close to the fire, looking extremely pretty, though fragile, in a loose wrapper of pale blue trimmed with dark fur. She was supporting her head on one hand, and resting her elbow on a tea-table beside her. Lounging back in a deep chair, and apparently quite at his ease, was Alec Watson. They were talking earnestly, and Mark's entrance startled them both.

Celia half sprung up exclaiming—

‘What is the matter, Mark? What on earth are you bringing Leo down for at this hour?’

Alec rose and put out his hand to Mark, who, merely acknowledging it with a nod of his head, said in a tone which expressed annoyance—

‘He is ill, Celia; or, at any rate, there is something very seriously wrong with him. I am very uneasy. Has Hearne been here to-day, or are you still expecting him?’

‘What ridiculous nonsense is this?’ she replied. ‘Why should you imagine the child is ill? Did Julie call you to see him? Does she say he is ill? I saw her after lunch; she said nothing about him then. Give him to me; he is all right. Why did you disturb him? he is generally asleep at this hour.’

‘No, leave him as he is, poor little chap; he is easy now. He was in great pain when I went up to him, Celia. I wonder you didn’t hear him crying,’ said Mark, holding the child closer to him and rocking him gently as he spoke.

Celia frowned, and looked intensely vexed.

‘I shall hold him quite as comfortably as you,’ she said crossly. ‘One would think I wasn’t his mother! Let me take him, Mark.’

But he steadily refused, and repeated his question about the doctor.

She replied shortly that Dr Hearne had

been, and was not coming again unless she sent for him, which she did not intend to do.

‘I wish you to send for him now—at once, Celia,’ said Mark in a decided tone, which made her open her eyes and reply coldly,

‘I shall do nothing of the kind ; it is all your absurd imagination. Does it strike you the child is very ill ?’ she added, turning to Alec with a contemptuous look.

‘I don’t say he is very ill,’ said Mark in the same quiet tone, and not waiting for Alec’s opinion. ‘I simply wish Hearne to come and see him, for it is quite clear that in certain positions he is in great pain, and I will know the reason why. Julie has left him too much alone. I found him crying in his cot, and she has, to my certain knowledge, been away from the nursery for nearly an hour.’

He avoided mentioning Linda’s share in his anxiety, and continued—

‘You have said repeatedly that the child

cries perpetually. This is not right. Come over here, will you, please, Celia, and write a note for me to Hearne.'

He tried to speak gently, though he felt irritated at her mood, and moved over to the writing-table, which stood in the farther corner of the room.

Celia followed sulkily, giving a look at Alec which said plainly,

'Ridiculous folly!'

'Hearne lives in your street, Watson,' said Mark when the note was finished. 'I wonder if you would mind leaving it as you go?'

Under ordinary circumstances Alec would have readily acceded to such a simple request, but as, in the first place, he took Celia's view of the incident, and thought she was being bullied, and, in the second, he objected to the obvious hint to himself to take his leave, he replied coldly—

‘Nothing would give me greater pleasure, Mr Sergison, only unfortunately I don’t happen to be going straight home. I am going first to the Club.’

‘Then send one of the servants,’ said Mark, briefly to his wife, and he rang the bell forthwith.

While he was giving the order to the servant who appeared in response to the summons, Celia bent down and whispered to Alec,

‘Isn’t this absurd? The child is as well as you are. Quite a sudden freak, to annoy me!’

He muttered a sympathetic monosyllable, and asked in the same low tone when he might come again.

‘To-morrow,’ she answered promptly, feeling an instant desire to do anything she could to annoy her husband. He smiled in assent, and then took his leave.

Mark felt relieved at his departure, for he wanted to be alone with Celia. Her extraordinary lack of maternal anxiety bewildered him, for which he hoped that the presence of a visitor might account.

But the instant Alec had left, Celia dashed out of the room, and called angrily for Julie, with whom she had a long interview on the subject of the child's supposed illness. She returned to the drawing-room in a worse frame of mind than before. Julie had assured her that Monsieur was unreasonably fanciful, and that Leo was in perfect health ; that she had not left the nursery more than ten minutes at the outside, and that she was ever watchful of her charge.

Mark was surprised at the vehemence with which this was repeated by Celia, and he had seldom seen her so much upset about anything.

She seemed to take it as a personal

grievance, that he should assume a condition of things which she denied, and the argument gradually drifted from the first topic under discussion to a general revision of their mutual lives, she accusing him of a total want of comprehension of herself, while he vainly endeavoured to reassure her on every point, and to assert a union of heart, which, in his inmost soul, he knew did not, except in his own imagination, exist.

They were still parrying words, hurting one another, as only the intimacy of the marriage relation renders it possible to do, when, to the infinite relief of both, the doctor was announced.

He asked a few questions, and took the child into his own arms, skilfully handling it in the thorough examination which he saw was imperative, for his professional eye had taken in at the first glance, that the cause of the apparent suffering was one sug-

gesting surgical rather than medical treatment.

Celia remained in the room, concealing her vexation at the whole proceeding with ill-disguised contempt, and she promptly scouted the suggestion made at once by the doctor, that the boy had received some physical injury. She assured him that his nurse was most trustworthy and careful—that nothing of the nature of an accident could possibly have occurred; but in spite of all her protestations, the doctor pronounced his unhesitating opinion that the child had probably been allowed to fall, for there was no doubt whatever that dislocation of the hip-joint had taken place, causing the greatest suffering and uneasiness, except in certain positions of the body, which fact Mark, though ignorant of the cause, had discovered, and had been able thereby to alleviate temporarily.

‘The nurse must be interrogated,’ said the

doctor decidedly. 'She must be made to confess when and how the accident happened.'

In vain Celia defended Julie. Mark silenced her with the sternest look he had ever given her, and summoned Julie herself to answer a sharp fire of cross-examination from the doctor and himself. The woman at first stoutly and steadily denied all knowledge of any accident whatever, and she answered every question with defiant promptness, that confirmed the doctor's suspicions of her culpability. By degrees, however, bewildered by the questions put to her rapidly, and with scrutinizing gaze from professional eyes, she stammered and hesitated, and at length confessed that one night she had, on returning to the nursery, found the child lying on the floor of the second landing, having apparently crawled out of bed, and fallen half-way down stairs. She did not think at the time

that he was injured. He cried a little, but then he was a child who cried at all times.

‘Before this did he cry much?’ queried the doctor, his searching eyes compelling the truth from any but an accomplished liar.

‘Mais, certainement Monsieur!’ declared Julie, lapsing into French as a refuge for her untruth. ‘He is a child who has cried ever since I have been with madame. N’est-ce-pas, madame?’ she said, turning to her mistress, who assented with a slight nod of the head.

‘That will do, Julie, you can go now,’ said Mark quietly.

‘I shall want several things sent for, before I can put the child into a position of comparative ease,’ said the doctor. ‘If you will allow me, I will carry him up stairs, and get you to send out for what I require.’

‘Will it be a long business?’ asked Mark, his heart aching with a new found tenderness

for his suffering little son, and wishing that Celia would show something of the same solicitude.

‘It is impossible to say,’ replied the doctor, cautiously. ‘Much depends upon the amount of watchful care he receives from henceforth. Of course he must not be trusted to that woman again.’

This in so decided and authoritative a tone that Celia did not dare to remonstrate, though she rebelled vehemently against the dismissal of Julie, who suited her exactly as a personal attendant. She liked the flattery of the Frenchwoman, and had been so admirably relieved by her of all maternal responsibilities. She could not share her husband’s and the doctor’s evident mistrust of Julie, simply because, during her temporary absence from the nursery, the child had met with an accident ; but she felt that this was not the time for any such argument, and she acquiesced with

apparent readiness in the doctor's further suggestion of a temporary trained nurse.

It was some hours before all the necessary details for the child's comfort and well-being were finished, and Mark was fidgeting to get away to his work. He looked at the clock in dismay as the hours slipped by and found him still unable to leave the house, but at length Dr Hearne took his departure, and he was released. He ran upstairs to say one more word to Celia. He felt sure she must be suffering more on the boy's account than at first she chose to allow, and he went to her prepared to give her all the consolation of his strong love and sympathy.

She was in her room, sitting before the fire in a rocking-chair, and when he entered she looked annoyed.

'I am off now,' he said, 'but I wanted to see how you were feeling, dear. I am afraid all this has upset you ; you look tired.'

She made no response, nor did she look at him.

‘It is a sad business, Celia,’ he pursued, ‘and a long one, I fear.’ Then coming closer to her side he bent down and kissed her forehead.

‘I can’t help feeling, wife, that we have both been somewhat to blame for trusting our child so much to Julie. We must make amends in future. Eh, Celia?’

Still no answer, and her only action was a petulant movement away from him.

‘Dear! tell me, what is it you are thinking? Confide your feelings to me. I can share them, surely?’

Another pause, and the only sounds were the falling of a cinder or the fizzing of the coal-gas in the fire.

Mark knelt down beside his wife, and took one of her hands in his, compelling her to look at him.

‘What is it you want, Mark?’ she said at length, in a petulant voice, and averting her eyes from his face.

‘I want you to talk to me.’

‘I have nothing to say.’

‘About Leo? Nothing?’

‘What is there to say? It is most unfortunate. I am, of course, very sorry about it. I am not to blame, though. Don’t let us discuss it.’

‘You will dismiss Julie to-morrow?’

‘I see no reason whatever for that. Accidents will happen. She could not tell that Leo would crawl out of the room while she was away.’

‘No; but, my dear, you must surely allow that she is not the right sort of nurse for Leo. You are not strong enough to look after him much yourself, and it is all important he should have a reliable, trustworthy woman about him. You see that, don’t you?’

‘I shall not part with Julie,’ was Celia’s dogged reply.

Mark looked aghast at her, but before he could make any remonstrance, she continued,

‘Will you please tell me how you came to imagine that Leo was ill at all? You are not generally such an attentive father. What made you pay that unexpected visit to the nursery this afternoon?’

He hesitated out of consideration for Linda, and answered at first evasively.

‘I had my suspicions that Julie neglected Leo.’

‘Pray, why? I never hinted it to you. Why should you suddenly suspect my most trusted servant?’

‘She constantly leaves the nursery for long periods; this evening she was away for nearly an hour.’

‘How do you know? You were not in

the house long before you brought him down. I heard you come in.'

He paused, and then incautiously said—

'I am not alone in my distrust of Julie.'

'Who shares it?' Celia asked, sharply, and Mark felt compelled to answer—

'Linda—she'—

'Ah!' broke in Celia, passionately; 'your paid spy on me and my servants! I have your confession at last.'

'*Celia!*'

His tone was one of horror and incredulity. Was her brain unhinged by the recent incident? He scarcely knew how to frame a reply, and yet it was imperative to rid her of this preposterous supposition.

She interrupted him, however, as he began to speak.

'Oh, it is all very well to be indignant. Of course I know. I have known all along that you and that Miss Grey are combining to

make my life intolerable. She comes here every day ostensibly to work for you, but all the time she is working against you ; for she makes mischief by her tale-bearing, false tongue ; and I knew it was she who set you against Julie, and made you fancy such things about Leo.'

' *Fancy !* ' he ejaculated.

She went on in the same rapid, vehement way—

' I am a cypher in my own house. She and you settle everything between you. She tells you the servant I have chosen for my child is not to be trusted, and you believe her without referring the matter to me at all. I told you when I married you that I hated Linda Grey. I repeated it to you when you asked her to come and stay here ; and I tell it you again now—I hate her. And that you should have her here every day in direct opposition to my wishes, is an insult

to me. You make a great pretence of loving me, of holding a high ideal of our marriage. To me it is a mockery, a sham, and I am sick of it. We had better part. We are not in the least suited. We never were—'

'Celia! I beseech you!' he gasped; but she sat up and pushed him away.

'We are both wretched. We had better face the fact and be honest. Linda Grey suits you far better than I do. I will go and make my own life. You shall have your freedom again. You persuaded me we should be happy. We have always been miserable.'

She stopped to take breath, and he moved over to the fireplace and leaned his head on his hand, too stunned for the moment to think or formulate any reply to her vehement outburst.

When we are misunderstood by those we love, all consciousness of personal suffering

is lost in a despair which fills our souls at the hopeless task of a true self-revelation. Words at such times are useless. Time and patience are the only vision-clearers.

Mark's work faded from his memory. The only thing that existed in his mind was the awful conviction that for herself Celia had spoken the truth.

That, notwithstanding his unutterable devotion to her personality, she and he were hopelessly unsuited.

His was a case which offered a problem to the advocates of our present marriage system, and for which he himself saw no solution.

He was willing to make any concessions in reason to Celia. He would have separated from Linda had he believed in the efficacy of such a step to bring about a closer union between him and his wife. But he knew that the cause of their disunion lay deeper

than the presence or absence of Linda. It was their essential incompatibility, which no rearrangement of mere external detail could alter, and which was the reason of the existing discord in their lives.

Baffled, perplexed with conflicting feelings, he raised his head, and in a hollow whisper said briefly—

‘I cannot answer you to-night. I must think out the terrible situation.’

Turning away, he moved slowly towards the door, but half way he stopped, and coming back to her side, he said quietly, in a tone of intense suppressed emotion—

‘Nothing can ever alter my love for you. No other woman is what you are and always will be to me. I may have failed to make you happy ; but if I had my choice over again, I would never ask or wish for anybody else as my wife.’

For an instant she lifted her eyes to

his, and the expression she met made her wince.

It was the vision of a human soul in its first agony of disillusionment. A sight truly to make a wife's heart quail before it.

In a sudden impulse of longing, he made a half move to kiss her, but something in her face checked him, and with a heavy sigh, that was almost a groan, he left the room.

CHAPTER XXI

'I'm not denyin' the women are foolish,
God Almighty made 'em to match the men.'

—GEORGE ELIOT.

ALEC WATSON lived in a flat in Mount Street.

He was fond of his own society.

It was a part of his self-complacency.

He seldom went out early in the day, and breakfasted late.

About eleven o'clock on the morning of the day after the incident of Leo Sergison's discovered illness, he was sitting in his dining-room smoking his third cigarette and idly scanning the newspaper.

His servant entered with a mysterious air, and, closing the door carefully behind him, said in a kind of stage whisper,

‘A lady in the drawing-room to see you, Sir.’

‘A lady! Who is she?’ said his master, quickly casting about in his mind for identification of the stranger.

‘I don’t know, Sir. She would give no name. She only said she must see you.’

‘All right, Graham,’ said Alec rising; then experiencing a sudden fear that it might be Elsa Kronstadt on a visit of vengeance, he added as he left the room,

‘Be within call; I may want you—to—to fetch a cab for the lady.’

Graham understood, and remained within earshot.

When Alec opened the door of the room, styled euphemistically by his servant the ‘drawing-room,’ his heart came into his mouth, for there, in front of the fire, holding up a corner of her skirt as she extended one small foot to the warm blaze, was Celia.

He gasped her name, and she turned her head and smiled, giving him her hand, but not moving from her position.

It was a significant action, implying a familiarity and a sense of ease in his rooms which delighted him.

He rushed forward and seized both her hands, exclaiming in a glad voice—

‘You! What made you come? What is the matter?’

‘What a nice welcome to give any one,’ said she, laughing a little scornfully, but inwardly noting with a sense of satisfaction his pleased air.

‘It is because you are so welcome that I am almost unable to believe my eyes,’ he said. ‘You dear! how are you to-day? and how is the little chap?’

Celia looked away and fixed her eyes on the fire as she answered curtly—

‘I haven’t come to talk about my family.’

He was puzzled by her manner, and wondered what had brought her in this unexpected fashion to him.

Yesterday, though gracious and friendly, she had resisted every attempt on his part at a repetition of his former advances, yet now she was doing the most daringly compromising thing, and deliberately of her own accord.

He recalled her words in the National Gallery—

‘ I won’t come to your rooms because I am married, and I wish to remain so.’

Was it possible she had changed her mind and was willing to leave her husband for himself?

The thought staggered him, for three weeks had passed since the first fever of his love-sickness had seized him, which every one knows that for a Londoner is a long period.

This morning, and because it looked like a possibility, he hoped it might not be a probability.

Suddenly remembering Graham's certain proximity to the keyhole, he swiftly crossed the room, and, opening the door, quickly came in violent contact with his servant's head—as he fully expected to do.

‘You needn't wait, Graham. I will ring when I want you.’

The man made no reply, but disappeared obediently.

When, by the sound of the closing swing door leading to the kitchen, Alec was sure that privacy was secured, he returned to Celia's side and said in a low voice—

‘Now! tell me why you've come.’

‘Why do you think, Alec?’ she said in the same key, and moving closer to him, yet without looking at him.

‘This!’ he replied, seizing her in his arms

with forcible eloquence, and compelling her to meet his eyes.

For a second she returned his glance full and straight, then bending her head down she whispered—

‘Yes ; I can’t do without you after all.’

His reluctance vanished, and he demonstrated fully his appreciation of her remark, proving that he had served his lover’s novitiate.

Presently Celia shook herself free from his clasp, and said in as calm a voice as she could command—

‘Now let us talk it out quietly, if we can.’

‘Ah !’ he sighed. ‘Yes ; there is heaps to say, isn’t there ?’

‘Any amount. But, first, tell me what time is it ?’

‘Never mind the time ; quite early.’

‘You don’t want to go out ?’

‘Celia !’

Another proof followed.

‘Well; where shall we begin?’

‘I don’t care. Anywhere! only don’t make haste to end.’

‘It’s just the end I am nervous about.’

‘This morning or’—

‘No, not this morning. What end were you meaning when you stopped?’

‘Well—the inevitable end of—of—why this sort of thing of course, you foolish little goose.’

‘And that is exactly what is worrying me.’

‘On my account, or your own?’

‘Pooh! *yours*? of course not! it doesn’t very much matter to you.’

‘How, not matter?’

‘Oh well, we needn’t beat about the bush. I suppose we understand one another.’

‘Perfectly, I think. No two people ever understood each other better, I should say.’

‘Yes—but look here, Alec—we can’t do it.’

He stared at her, and then caught her once more to him and kissed her vehemently.

‘Take off your hat, and that hot thing round your neck!’ he said, pulling at her boa, and throwing it to the other end of the room.

‘Don’t, Alec! its real sable,’ she cried in pretended dismay, and removing her hat as she spoke.

‘It won’t hurt.—I can give you another if it does—there—now you look ever so much better—lean back—so—now go on with your remark—what is there we can’t do—and why, pray?’

‘*He* wouldn’t let me.’

Alec broke into one of his loudest laughs.

‘He! did you then mean to ask his permission?’

‘You don’t understand,’ she answered, slowly twisting her rings round her finger.

‘I mean, Alec, he will never set me free.’

‘The brute! I had no idea he was so vindictive.’

‘Oh no! that isn’t it. He has such peculiar views, you know, about marriage. He is a Socialist.’

‘Well, I never heard that Socialists were troubled with religious scruples—are they?’

‘No, no! not exactly religious; but he has some extraordinary ideas about divorce.’

‘But, my dear child, he may have what ideas he pleases. He can’t refuse to divorce you, if you—if we, that is—comply with the necessary conditions.’

‘Ah, but that is just what he would do. You see, he doesn’t allow that a wife is a man’s property. He looks upon marriage as a kind of partnership, in which each has equal rights—equal freedom.’

Alec opened his eyes very wide indeed.

He had never heard of the ‘new basis of marriage.’

‘That’s all very well—or very ill as one happens to look at it—as a theory,’ he said decidedly, ‘but in practice it’s all rot. You simply haven’t understood his ideas, Celia. No Englishman alive—except of course a *mari-complaisant*, which I don’t suppose Sergison is exactly—would give himself away like that.’

‘How do you mean? give himself away?’

‘Why, yes, don’t you see. That lofty idea of equal freedom is only a pretty device on his part for securing any amount of licence for himself. You will never get a man of monogamous instinct to advocate such a theory. Now do you see?’

‘No,’ said Celia doubtfully, ‘I don’t, because I haven’t an idea what that long word means that you used just now.’

‘Well then—in plain English, Sergison wants to amuse himself, and pretends that you may do the same for all he cares. As a

matter of fact, I should say he would care very decidedly, and I should not like to be the object of his solicitude. But I say, don't let us talk about him. If we do our part, he simply must be made to do the rest.'

'Well,' she said dubiously, 'you will think it out, won't you, Alec? and I will do whatever you tell me.'

'We won't waste any time thinking, my dear, we have had long enough to do that. It is time for action now. But, Celia, you know what it will involve, don't you?'

'As well as you do.'

'And you won't shirk it when it comes to the point?'

'Shall you?'

'Am I likely to! Haven't I persuaded you yet that I am in earnest, that I want you awfully, and that I've waited very patiently for this?'

‘ You dreadful humbug ! you never wanted me when you could have me.’

‘ I can have you now, and I want you all the more.’

‘ Don’t you want to know what made me come to you like this to-day ? You never thought I should, did you ? ’

‘ I thought you would one of these days. But do tell me why you didn’t give me a hint of your feelings yesterday. You were so stand-off ! ’

‘ I shan’t tell you to-day, it will make you conceited.’

‘ No, no ! tell me.’

‘ You have heard me speak of a woman called Linda Grey, haven’t you ? ’

‘ Yes—a sort of female secretary to Sergison, isn’t she ? ’

‘ Yes. Well—she was at the bottom of all that fuss you saw *him* make yesterday about Leo. She is a meddlesome, interfering cat,

and she can do just what she pleases with Mark.'

Alec made a sympathetic movement, and she continued with more warmth—

'She has persuaded him that the child's accident—yes, I forgot to tell you the doctor says he has injured his hip somehow; he crawled out of bed while his nurse was out of the room for a minute, and fell part of the way down stairs. I am convinced he isn't really much hurt, for you know what babies are, and how easily they cry if they are touched. But those two—Mark and the Grey Cat—have laid their heads together, and say that my French woman, Julie, a simply invaluable servant, devoted to Leo and to me, is to blame, and ought to be sent away.'

'But what cool cheek! What business is it of Miss Grey's? Why don't you walk into her? You won't give in, shall you? I

suppose you know best about your own servants ?’

‘ Of course I do, and of course Miss Grey has no business whatever to say a word about anything in my house ; but Mark is simply infatuated about her, and actually sides with her against me.’

I never heard of such a thing. Celia, you are shamefully treated, you poor little woman ; but it makes me awfully happy to think you should come straight off to me ; it was delicious of you.’

He drew her towards him, and she rested against him for a few minutes in pleased acceptance of his sympathy.

‘ Yes, Alec,’ she said softly, ‘ I felt I could bear my life no longer with Mark. We had a dreadful scene, and I told him our marriage was a mistake, and that I was tired of it.’

‘ And what did he say ?’

‘ I don’t know, I am sure ; I didn’t listen.

Nothing much ; he never does say much ; he is the most aggravatingly-composed person I ever saw. I hate placid-tempered people ; they make me long to say and do outrageous things, just to provoke them into a passion.'

'Sergison looks such a bad-tempered chap, though, I should have thought your saying that to him about your marriage would have driven him wild. If you said it to me, I know I should tell you to go to the devil, or something equally elegant.'

'Yes ; that's why I like you.'

'Love me, you mean—say love, Celia!'

She looked up quickly with a mischievous expression, and said,

'Do you think I know what love is ? You told me the other day I didn't.

'Never mind the other day ; say it now. If you don't, I'll make you.'

'Make me ! oh, how absurd ! You couldn't

make me do or say the smallest thing I didn't choose to.'

'Yes, I can.'

And in a second he had pinned her arms and was holding her down on the sofa, bending his face, flushed partly with passion, partly with determination to master her, over hers.

'Don't, Alec!' she cried, struggling to free herself, and yet liking to feel his strength of will and muscle. Here was a man who would supply her life with the excitement she craved and lacked. 'Don't! you are hurting my arms; let me get up.'

'Not until you say, "I love you,"' he replied, doggedly.

'But I have given you proof of it by coming here this morning; and it is getting dreadfully late; do let me go.'

'Say it then, or'—

'Or what?'

‘I shall believe you’re only playing with me, and that you really don’t know what love is.’

‘Oh, dear!’ sighed she in pretended despair, ‘what a tyrant you will be! There, then, Mr Alec Watson—I love you.’

Then, as he released her, and was going to recapture her to embrace her, she sprang up and darted across the room, picked up her sable fur, and brandished it, exclaiming—

‘And I am a ridiculous fool to do it.’

‘Oh, if you come to that, we are both fools. You don’t know what a perfect idiot I’ve been about you, Celia. I assure you I haven’t had a peaceful moment since that day at the National Gallery. What a horrid little wretch you were all the afternoon. Aren’t you sorry? say you are before you go. Tell me you wanted to come here desperately all the time. Now didn’t you?’

‘ I most certainly shall say nothing of the kind. I had no intention of coming here that afternoon, and I knew you would have been horrified if I had taken you at your word then.’

‘ Celia ! what a shame ! Why do you say that ? Don’t you believe that I was in earnest in saying how much I cared for you ; I mean, especially, in that letter I wrote.’

‘ I couldn’t believe it straight away, simply because you wrote it. You see I knew you too well.’

‘ Incorrigible tease ! Well, do you believe me now ?’

‘ On the whole I think I do. Yes, yes, Alec ; don’t pounce at me again. I do ! I do ! I must go now. Where’s my hat ? Why, it is under the chair ; how horrid ! Pick it up. Thanks ; and the pin ? Oh, there in the cushion. By the way, what will that solemn looking man of yours say to your

having a lady visitor all the morning. I have been here nearly three hours. Is he discreet?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘He knows your habits?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘Oh, then it is a habit of yours?’

‘What is? I don’t know what you are driving at. I was thinking how becoming that hat is.’

‘Don’t evade me. You are in the habit, then, of receiving lady visitors every morning?’

‘When did I say so? Your hat and boa are really most fetching, Celia.’

‘Never mind my clothes; do answer me. Yes or no. *Are you?*’

‘Am I in the habit of having lady visitors every morning? No such luck. Why, I do believe you are jealous, Celia!’

‘I am; horribly jealous. I warn you,

Alec, I shall want to monopolise you entirely. I shall make myself perfectly ill if I ever imagine you look at another woman. And if ever you are *nice* to another woman—why, I shall simply die of misery.'

She came up to him as she spoke and laid both her arms on his with such an expression of intensity on her face that he was fairly startled.

'I shall never give you cause for jealousy, my darling,' he said soothingly; 'but you know that I am equally jealous, and you must be just as considerate for my feelings.'

'We are terribly alike!' she said, with a flash of misgiving for the future.

'Delightfully; not terribly!' he corrected. 'We shall suit one another exactly; because we are so much alike we shall be able to understand one another's every mood so well.'

'You don't think that opposites get on better, then?'

‘I am sure they don’t! How can they have anything in common?’

‘No; how can they? Certainly I’ve been trying my “opposite” all this time without much success.’

‘Yes, of course; it was the most foolish, absurd experiment of yours.’

‘I knew it was only an experiment. I was so bored—it was all your fault, Alec!’

‘You darling! did you really care, then? Why didn’t you ever show it to me?’

‘I couldn’t—first—you were so horrid.’

‘Oh, Celia! I never meant to be. Well’—kissing her—‘we aren’t going to be horrid, either of us, any more, are we?’

‘I hope not; it would be awful if we weren’t happy after all.’

‘But we shall be. Now, when am I to see you again? Let me have a line to-night. I can’t bear an hour now that you are out of my sight, and it is dreadful to let you go

back to that miserable life. It shan't be for long, though. Very, very soon it shall all be a thing of the past, and our happy present the only reality. Good-bye, my sweetheart.

‘Not good-bye, Alec, *à bientôt*.’

‘Yes, yes, *à demain*.’

Graham's curiosity that day remained unsatisfied, for his master let the unknown visitor out without ringing for him, and he could only conjecture and draw his own conclusions, which were amazingly wide of the truth considering all things.

But then to Graham, Alec had hitherto been almost a hero.

CHAPTER XXII

'Aimer quelqu'un c'est lui ôler le droit et lui donner la puissance de nous faire souffrir.'—COMTESSE DIANE.

CELIA avoided meeting her husband until she had received definite instructions as to her future plans. This was not difficult, for Mark only returned for a few hours' sleep during the following day, when he was told that his wife was in her room, and did not wish to be disturbed.

He longed to go to her, to gain some reassurance of her appreciation of his true devotion to her. But he dared not. And he felt weary of his inability to approach or understand her.

Not until the second day after the discovery of the boy's injury did they see one

another. Their meeting was not reassuring. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, Mark having just come home, intending to spend a quiet evening by his own fireside, and, as he hoped, in the affectionate companionship of his wife, when he found a telegram summoning him to the House.

A strike was threatened at Manchester, and a hasty conference of Labour Members had been called, at which Mark's presence was imperative.

He went up stairs in search of Celia, and looked into the drawing-room expecting to find her.

She was not there, and as he was standing outside the door preparing to go up to her room, he heard her footsteps, and she appeared coming slowly down the stairs in her hat and jacket, fastening her gloves as she came, and not paying any more heed to him than if he had been a figure of stone.

He waited at the foot of the stairs in silence, taking in every detail of her figure, of her graceful movements, of her soft, bright hair, and general charm. And as he realised that she was his wife, he caught his breath, for in that very word lay the gist of his misery.

‘A little more, and how much it is ;
A little less, and what worlds away.’

When she arrived at the bottom stair, she looked up, and said in an indifferent way—

‘Oh, there you are. I wondered when you were going to make your appearance again. Do you dine at home to-night?’

‘I had intended to do so,’ he replied, cut to the quick by her cold manner, but too sore to show it; ‘but I have just had a telegram summoning me away. I came to find you, to tell you.’

‘Then you won’t dine at home? Shall you want anything to eat when you come

in?' she said, passing him close, as she opened the drawing-room door beside him.

'I shall want nothing, thanks,' he rejoined, and turning quickly he ran down stairs, and shut himself into his study.

A little later he went out, and Celia gave a sigh of relief as she heard the door shut after him.

Then she sat down and wrote a hurried note to Alec, bidding him come and dine with her at eight that evening.

He readily obeyed her request, and made his appearance at the appointed hour, dressed, and looking as cool and composed as if he had come to dine with a male acquaintance rather than with the woman he was about to dishonour.

Celia received him with equal *sang-froid*, and said, for the benefit of the servant who ushered him in,

'I am sorry to say my husband will not

be at home to dinner. He has been unexpectedly called away.'

Throughout the dinner the same farce of decorum was kept up, nor did they relax until they found themselves once more alone together in the drawing-room.

'Now,' said Celia, 'we will discuss plans. What is your latest idea?'

They proceeded to talk over the various suggestions they had made by correspondence, and the clock struck nine before they had arrived at any final conclusions.

All at once, without any sound of bell or of opening doors below, the drawing-room door opened quickly, and Linda Grey stood hesitating on the threshold.

She had knocked, but they were too absorbed to hear her, and she took her entrance for granted.

Alec was sitting on a low stool at Celia's feet holding one of her hands, looking up

into her face, and it was impossible for him to spring up and take a conventional attitude with anything like success.

Celia turned scarlet. She was convinced that Mark had set Linda as a spy upon her, and this confirmed her suspicions.

On taking in the tableau, Linda would fain have rushed away again. She felt as much confused as the other two, and for a second she stood in bewildered uncertainty how to act.

‘Mark sent me,’ she began, stammeringly, when Celia rose and went towards her, with flashing eyes, causing her to correct herself hurriedly. ‘I beg your pardon. *Mr Ser-gison* asked me to find and post an important letter which he left in his study—and to give you this.’

She held out a note to Celia, and abruptly turning, left the room without giving the other time to reply.

Celia glanced at the note, and her lips curled contemptuously.

‘Read that!’ she said, tossing it scornfully to Alec.

It was brief.

‘I forgot to ask you to see that I am not locked out to-night. I have left my latch-key at home by mistake, unless I have lost it. Please tell one of the maids to sit up. Linda kindly takes this, as it is too late to wire.—M. S.’

‘A mere pretext, of course!’ exclaimed Alec, when he had read it. ‘But never mind, it only makes our course the easier. This time to-morrow he won’t want any further explanation of what his precious detective will report to him. Good Lord! but she is plain! and what a ferocious expression she put on when she saw me! One would think she hadn’t expected to find us together; or was it pleasure at having caught us so easily?’

They discussed the new development of affairs, and by the time Alec took his leave their plans were made.

Linda's feelings were rather disturbed by the incident. She had very little natural curiosity, and, for all she knew, the young man who was looking so lover-like in Celia's room might be merely a cousin on an intimate footing. But she had seen Celia's angry look when she gave her the note, and it began to dawn on her that she might possibly be herself a cause for jealousy between Mark and his wife, the fact having become patent of late that their relations were not perfectly harmonious.

As she walked home that evening she doubted whether it would be wise to tell Mark of her fears, and to offer to resign her post in his office. But a something that was almost clairvoyant perception told her it would make matters worse if she alluded to the situation in which she had found Celia, and

she therefore wisely determined to keep her own counsel.

Celia was very anxious to discover what Linda had reported to Mark, and the next morning she purposely came down to breakfast. This would give him an opportunity of speaking first, in which case she intended to confess frankly her preference for Alec, and her intention of going away with him.

Mark naturally had neither seen nor heard from Linda, and had no suspicion of what was on his wife's mind. He was surprised to see her dressed so early, for since her illness her habit had been to breakfast in her room.

His heart bounded with the sudden hope that she was sorry for her coldness, and was showing her contrition by making this unwonted effort to give him more of her company.

He at once laid down the newspaper that he was reading when she came in, and went forward to say good morning in an affectionate manner.

She looked slightly surprised, and deftly eluded his proffered kiss, saying hurriedly,

‘I am going out early ; I want breakfast quickly.’

He resumed his seat, and played with his knife and fork in silence.

Celia handed him his coffee, and he took it without a remark.

Presently she said, sarcastically,

‘You are a very amusing companion, I must say.’

‘I am tired,’ he replied briefly.

He was in no mood for taunts, and he knew he was no match for her in repartee.

‘Did you see Hearne when he called yesterday ?’ he asked, after a short time.

‘I did,’ she answered.

‘He thinks Leo will not ultimately be a cripple, does he?’

‘Oh, dear, no.’

‘Do you like the nurse?’

‘She seems to know her work.’

‘What arrangements have you made for Julie’s return to France?’

‘I have arranged it quite satisfactorily.’

He looked up, astonished at her answer, for he had expected some further expression of her determination not to part with Julie.

‘I am very glad,’ he said, heartily; ‘I am very glad indeed.’

‘I know you are always pleased when you think you have gained your own way,’ she rejoined sharply. ‘This time I have had my way also in the matter.’

‘For once, then, our ways coincide! That is very pleasant,’ he said, in assumed playful-

ness, but she took no notice, and again the silence became oppressive.

Mark was not long finishing his breakfast, and he got up and went towards the door. As he reached it he turned back and said,

‘By the way, Celia, did you happen to notice the time when Linda brought you my note last night? I ask because I am particularly anxious to know if the letter was posted before nine o’clock, that she said she would kindly find a post for me.’

His tone was so entirely natural, and his whole manner so frank and straightforward, that she could not, in spite of herself, suspect him of having deliberately set a spy upon her, but not feeling completely reassured, she put him to a further test.

‘I consider Miss Grey’s appearance in my house and in my drawing-room at any hour an intrusion,’ she said coldly; ‘so I certainly

should take no note whatever of the time you chose to send her.'

He looked at her in mute dismay.

It seemed impossible to go on living in this perpetual estrangement and misunderstanding.

Wearily he turned on his heel and left her, little thinking when and in what way he would next see her.

.

When Mark came in that evening, about an hour before dinner, he found a note on his study table in Celia's handwriting, which opening, he read as follows :—

'I warned you before you married me of my incapacity to look upon marriage as you did. I always knew we were utterly unsuited.

'The experiment has failed.

'When you receive this I shall have left England with the only man I ever loved,

and who understands me as you never could do.

‘The sole boon I ask of you now is that you will set me free.

‘This is the only way in which you can prove that you ever cared for me.

‘Leo is yours. I never wanted a child, and I shall make no attempt to see him. Tell him, when he can understand it, that his mother is dead.

‘If you wish to communicate with me, please do so¹ through Messrs Dewhurst & Crawley, Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

‘CELIA.’

Mark read this through three times before he took in the full purport of it.

Then he pushed away all the things in front of him, and leaning his arms on the writing-table, he sat with his head buried in them—stunned—stupefied—confounded—with every hope gone, and every theory overthrown on which he had built up his marriage.

His whole soul revolted against the suggestion of divorcing his wife. He loved every hair of her head, and the bare idea of exposing her to the publicity and criticism of the Divorce Court filled him with horror.

That he had failed to make her happy was bad enough without taking the world into his confidence. Yet since he had married her according to the law of the land, there was no choice left to him but to release her according to the same law. The only other alternative of leaving her free to love, but without being free to remarry if she wished it, seemed to him inconsistent with his desire to see her happy.

If only she had trusted him more !

Since, however, she had not, it only remained to him to release her in the only possible way, and in order to do this he must ask the advice of a stranger.

He had few friends to whom he could

confide his difficulties. He shrank from discussing it with Linda, for he remembered her words—

‘Are you sure she is capable of understanding your views of life?’

And his confident reply—

‘She cannot live with me without understanding them.’

He remained for hours sitting in a dream of bewilderment, framing first one theory and then another to account for the failure of his marriage.

Nothing seemed to fit the facts of the case, and he was tempted to doubt whether after all the world was ripe for any of the communistic ideas which to him had hitherto appeared potent to regenerate humanity.

CHAPTER XXIII

‘ The tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,
Chopped by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
But the sap lasts,—and still the seed we find
Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North,
So shall a better Spring less bitter fruit bring forth.’

—LORD BYRON.

ABOUT ten o'clock Mark roused himself and recollected that he had made an appointment for that evening with Rochart. His friend's arrival in London struck him at this point as providential. Rochart was the only man whose advice he should value, for the reason that he knew it would point the only course he should feel disposed to take.

He wended his way to Bloomsbury, walking like a man in a dream, seeing nothing consciously, yet taking unconsciously the shortest route.

Rochart was lodging in a humble street leading off the Tottenham Court Road, and at Mark's knock he appeared himself at the door.

The keen grey eyes looked from under their shaggy brows, and at once perceived trouble in the other man's face.

'Come in, my friend,' he exclaimed with a glad note of welcome in his voice that was intended to carry with it reassurance of sympathy. 'Come in; you are late. I had given you up.'

Mark entered without speaking, and walking up to the mantelpiece, he leaned his forehead down upon it, staring vacantly into the fire with his back to his host.

Rochart seemed to be reading his trouble through this attitude, and both remained silent for some few minutes.

Presently Mark said, yet without moving—

‘What do you do when your theories of life are overthrown?’

‘As I build only with the stones of experience,’ replied the other, ‘my buildings do not fall.’

‘But there are some experiences which must needs be built upon theory. What of them?’

‘They are jerry-built structures, and can be allowed to fall into ruin. Their very fall is hopeful. It shows us the possibility of better architecture.’

Then laying a strong hand on Mark’s shoulder, he added—

‘Come, my friend ; be strong. One of your walls has given way. What of that ? You have still the bricks wherewith to build it up again.’

Mark lifted his head and stood facing his friend.

‘Rochart,’ he said in a hollow voice, ‘would to God it were only one of my walls that has

fallen ! It is my whole structure, and I have no more bricks.'

'In plain English, tell me what has happened. It is your wife—yes? She'—

'She has left me.'

A pause.

Then, from Rochart, abruptly—

'You did not expect that?'

'Why should I? I loved her, and I thought and hoped she—respected me.'

'How came you to love her? She was not your companion.'

'She was my wife. She appealed to me as no other woman ever had done. Rochart, old man, you know what my views are. You remember in old days how we used to hammer out our theories of life, and marriage, and the social order. I fell in love with *her*, and all my theories were scattered to the winds. I only felt I must have her in my life, and that my love for her was the stimulus it lacked.

I needed the inspiration which love gives, but—somehow—in spite of the love, the inspiration halted.'

'Because—shall I tell you why it halted? Because you were not in love with the woman, but with your own love of her. The abstract must become the concrete ere it can act as a lever. You loved woman with a capital W, and the woman you chose spelt her name otherwise. Was not this so? I saw her in Paris, remember. I knew why your efforts at play-writing there were not successful. I felt she was hampering you. And this is not defeat, nor ruin, my friend, but the harbinger of success and of progress for you individually.'

'Rochart, I care nothing for success or for individual progress,' said Mark impatiently. 'I loved every hair of that woman's head, and without her my life will be a waste, a barren wilderness.'

Rochart stirred the ashes in his pipe and smoked in silence for a few moments. Mark paced the room in restless inability to sit and quietly discuss the situation, feeling disappointed at his friend's attitude of mind, at his apparent want of comprehension of the blow which had fallen.

'I came,' he said presently, 'to ask your advice.'

'Yes; I will give it you; that goes without saying. What is the point?'

'She has left me for another man. You understood that?'

(Rochart nodded.)

'What am I to do? Divorce her?'

'You are married by the law of England, I suppose?' he asked.

'Yes, replied Mark; 'of course.'

'Then you have no choice—if, that is to say, she desires to live for life with the other man.'

‘You think I have not? That is just what I wondered.’

‘How? You would carry out our communistic theory and leave her free to obey the dictates of her own heart?’

‘Precisely. And I cannot see whether or no that is fair to her, since, having left me in this manner, she evidently prefers that other to myself; and, if free to do so, may wish to marry him.’

‘Did you not explain your theories of love to her before you married her?’

‘Yes—certainly.’

‘Then how came she to go away without taking you into her confidence?’

Marked shrugged his shoulders.

‘That is just my perplexity, and the reason of my despair. For it proves her want of trust in me.’

Rochart laughed cynically.

‘Women like that don’t trust,’ he said;

‘they act simply on impulse. Have you any children? I forget.’

‘One boy.’

‘Has he gone with his mother?’

‘Oh, no!’

‘You kept him?’

‘She left him — she never desired a child; it was always a source of annoyance to her.’

Rochart got up from his chair, and stood with his legs wide apart, his back to the fire, and his hands in his pockets; an attitude, with him, of meditation and perplexity.

‘It is a difficult case,’ he said after awhile; ‘a very difficult case. A woman without maternal instinct will not remain constant to any man. Constancy, my friend, we dissociate, do we not, from faithfulness?’

‘Yes,’ said Mark, appreciating Rochart’s distinction. ‘We know that the one does not necessarily imply the other.’

‘No,’ said Rochart. ‘And we know further, from our experience, that the conventional woman is merely constant, while the man, although seemingly inconstant, is truly faithful.’

‘Yet I believe, Rochart, that my wife is faithful to herself in her present inconstancy. I am inclined to think she has a more genuine feeling for this man than she had for me. He is of her world. He has money. He will probably satisfy her more completely than I ever did, or ever could.’

‘What was her temperament—warm?’

‘No man can pronounce upon the temperament of any woman whose soul he has not possessed,’ replied Mark, meditatively. ‘She may be ice to him and fire to another. In such matters I think women are truer than men. Love with them acts like a chemical, revealing the constituent elements of their nature. With men, in whom at least passion

is dissociated from love, the temperament seems to be the slave rather than the master of passion.'

'Knowing what I do of your life, I am surprised at your observations; since, I verily believe, your experience of women has been limited to one.'

'To love one woman wholly is in itself an education; it is an initiation into realities of which mere episodes of loving are but the counterfeit. The greater ever includes the less. He who loves knows what love is not; the affirmative is more potent than the negative; and the knowledge of any given thing is the measure of ignorance respecting it.'

'And what,' said Rochart, tentatively, 'if your wife were to return to you.'

'She will never return!' sighed Mark.

'She will, as soon as she hears you are attached to another woman.'

‘That she will never hear,’ said Mark, decidedly.

Rochart repressed a smile.

‘You cannot tell now,’ he said quietly. ‘You do not know all the possibilities within you.’

‘But I know the impossibilities!’

Rochart laughed softly.

‘You will, you think,’ he said, incredulously, ‘go through the rest of your life as I have done, with a human Cause for your mistress? Well, if so, I am glad this has happened to you. I deplored your marriage. We can ill spare men like you from our ranks. “*Il ne faut choisir pour épouse que la femme qu’on choisirait pour ami si elle était homme.*” There are women who are fit companions and mates for men, but of such was not your late wife. Make up your mind to work for the solid gain of human liberty, and you will in time look upon this experience

as the best thing that could have come about.

‘Take a pipe, my friend. Tobacco is the universal consoler, the faithful ally in all our adversity. No? You won’t smoke to-night? Well, then, I will. Tell me, who is that woman I saw in your office the other day? She is not English?’

‘Very much so,’ replied Mark, glad to change the subject, since Rochart was not wholly sympathetic. ‘She is Linda Grey, the girl of whom I wrote to you some time back; my collaborator in the “Heir Presumptive.”’

‘Ah!’

A long pause, during which Rochart puffed at his pipe in contemplative silence.

‘Why have you given up play-writing?’ he asked presently.

‘My other work has occupied my time,’ Mark answered, laconically.

‘ But you will take to it again ? ’

‘ Perhaps. ’

‘ With a drama of your own experiences. ’

‘ With myself as the hero or the villain ? ’

‘ Neither. We don’t want heroes or villains in modern drama or fiction. We simply want a true picture of modern life. ’

‘ You believe then in Realism ? ’

‘ Of course ! Realism is the only true form of Art. ’

‘ Define Art, Rochart. ’

Rochart meditated for a few seconds, then slowly knocking the ashes from his pipe before refilling it for the third time, he said, deliberately,

‘ Art, my friend, is the perfect adjustment of contrasts. It is the faculty for harmonizing the apparently discordant. ’

‘ Then, ’ suggested Mark, ‘ the Realist only succeeds when his work is strictly proportionate ? ’

Rochart assented.

‘It is Goethe,’ he added, ‘who says that the Beautiful is the result of happy position.’

‘Then what disgusts us in the false Realism,’ replied Mark, ‘is the lack of proportion in elements which are used. But surely much depends also on the point of view from which the work is seen?’

‘Certainly. The realistic artist needs an idealistic public to appreciate him. To the man who goes about looking for shadows without sunshine, or for sunshine without shadows, the most artistic studies will seem unsatisfactory. To arrive at balance in every detail of life, needs consummate skill. Failure means the inability, in some respect, to preserve equilibrium.’

The two friends talked on through the night, and the intercourse with Rochart strengthened and consoled Mark, who re-

turned to his now desolate home in a more robust frame of mind.

Next morning, at the usual hour, Linda met him at the office-door. He looked so haggard from want of sleep, that she was startled at his appearance, and exclaimed involuntarily,

‘Is anything the matter?’

He drew her aside to let one of the clerks pass, and answered quietly,

‘Come out for a minute, I want to speak to you.’

They turned back along the Strand, where the office was located, and down one of the smaller streets leading on to the Embankment. Neither spoke a word until they reached the gardens below the Savoy Hotel, when Mark led the way to a seat, and sat down without ceremony.

Linda followed his example. The morning was bright and frosty, still and clear of fog.

The Cleopatra Needle stood out in strong relief against the blue of the sky, reminding Linda, as she gazed absently upon it, of the strange unity underlying all human life.

An Egyptian queen ruling a strong soldier by the power of her fascination.

A modern Englishwoman transforming a capable intellectual man into a hollow-eyed, stricken shadow of himself.

Egypt or London! what matters the locality?

Eros is god, and his reign is universal.

Mark plunged at once into what he had to say.

‘You were right, Linda, it was a mistake. She could not understand—things as we—that is I—see them.’

Her quick instinct divined the rest.

‘She has left you?’ she asked very gently, feeling as if she were touching an open, raw wound.

He murmured an assent.

‘The boy?’ hazarded Linda.

‘He too is left.’

They sat on in silence. A group of gutter children played in front of them, and Linda wondered idly, whether they were less fortunate in having no well-trained nurse, or watchful mother, than the little boy whose mother had just deserted him for a caprice, a whim.

A piano-organ grinded out a popular polka under the windows of the Hotel, delighting the small girl-arabs, and exciting them to dance with truer poetry of motion and abandon of joy, than is seen in any London ball-room.

How could people grudge cheap bad music to these children! she thought. She wished Leo Sergison had such promise of joy, as she pictured his dull little life, motherless, guarded by irreproachable nurses, and receiving but the semblance of love from a

parent, in whom the well-spring of life had been suddenly dammed.

Mark seemed to find Linda's silent sympathy soothing, for he sat on till the Westminster clock chimed an hour, recalling him to his duty.

He rose abruptly, and poked the gravel with the point of his umbrella, as he said slowly,

'Linda, you know what this means to me. Help me to be strong, to be a man over it.'

'You can rely on me,' she answered, catching his hand and grasping it firmly.

He looked at her for an instant in silence. The mutual comprehension was the stronger for being wordless.

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The divorce was not difficult to arrange. It was an undefended case, the evidence perfectly simple and convincing.

In six weeks from the time of filing the petition the decree *nisi* was pronounced, and the news communicated by telegram to Alec Watson, who, with Celia, was awaiting the verdict at Nice before crossing over to Algiers.

It was the bitterest moment of Mark's life when he was forced to stand up and in open court accuse the woman he still, in spite of all the pain she had caused him, loved.

His examination occupied but a few minutes, but to himself it seemed an eternity of treachery on his part. As he replied to his counsel's questions, he felt that each word he spoke was putting a greater distance between him and Celia.

When he left the witness-box he reeled against the wall, and the words, 'Decree *nisi*, with costs,' sounded to his strained nerves like his own death-knell, putting out the light of life for ever, and bringing a darkness upon

him that he would need all the courage of his manhood to face.

Up to the last minute he had hoped against hope that Celia would return before the decree was irrevocable.

He almost prayed for the fulfilment of Ro-chart's suggestion of her return, and looked feverishly round the court for any signs of an interference with the course of his suit.

But none came, and the judge's verdict was followed instantaneously by the hard official announcement of the next case.

As Mark left the court, accompanied by his solicitor, fussy and desirous of being sympathetic, he wondered dumbly whether 'Bowles *versus* Bowles and Robinson' were present, and if they were feeling anything of the same anguish that he was experiencing, or whether they were, as his solicitor expressed it, 'considering themselves deuced lucky to be free.'

Beyond dismissing some of the unnecessary members of his household, he had made no change since Celia left. But now that the decree was made, and the fact was sealed, he felt that he must break up the house in Chelsea, and suit his manner of living to his reduced income.

Linda was ever his counsellor; he was scarcely aware how much he leant upon her, nor how indispensable to him she had become.

Her unobtrusiveness and unflagging industry made her valuable in his office, while her never-failing readiness to accompany him on a country ramble or a suburban excursion in search of fresh air, rendered her sympathetically essential.

A month later Mark received the offer of a trip to the United States with a Parliamentary friend, which he gladly accepted.

The *Comet* was left in safe keeping, the house in Tite Street was placed in agents' hands for re-letting, and Linda undertook, during Mark's absence, the entire charge of Leo.

CHAPTER XXIV

‘ And there is nothing new under the sun ;
Until the ancient race of Time be run
The old thorns shall grow out of the old stem,
And morning shall be cold and twilight grey.’

—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

THE six months all but a few days had passed, and Mark Sergison had returned from the States invigorated, braced, restored in mental balance. He had been in London a few weeks, and had taken up again his temporary abode in the Chelsea house prior to giving it over to a new tenant.

Linda had given up everything during Mark's absence for the care of Leo, and had come out in quite a new light.

Under her wise and judicious treatment the child had grown physically stronger and mentally brighter.

The injury to the hip was entirely cured, and even Mark felt a new interest in his little son, and to discern in him the promise of a distinct individuality.

He and Linda often discussed the boy's future from the abstract point of view, and found their aims ever identical.

One day, however, an incident occurred which threatened to put an end to all their plans for him, and to plunge Mark into fresh sorrow.

The weather for November was unusually severe, and one morning, while Linda was out, Leo was attacked with croup.

On her return she found him seriously ill, and she sent at once for his father.

Leo had been similarly attacked before, and they knew how to treat him without the aid of a doctor.

But for once the remedies seemed of no avail, and she had only one more resource—a hot bath.

To their intense relief and thankfulness it proved efficacious, and at length the gaspings and painful struggles for breath ceased somewhat, and the child lay still and quiet in Linda's arms.

‘The bath has relieved him!’ she said in a soft whisper, and Mark nodded contentedly.

After a little she thought it would be best to put him back into his bed, and laid him down, carefully covering him with a light, warm quilt, and seated herself on a chair, resting her arms on the rails of his cot so as to watch his every movement in case of another sudden attack. Mark kept his seat at the foot of the bed, and a profound silence reigned in the little room for some time. It had been a terrible experience to both—the sight of a tiny being struggling for life and fighting with a choking hand that seemed to be gripping its throat was one which could never be forgotten, and it stirred all the

strongest paternal feelings in Mark's breast, and made him realise, as he had never done hitherto, how much his life was bound up with that other little one's. How utterly alone he was but for this son of his, and how blank and dreary his existence would be if this croup attack ended fatally. Lonely! yes. No words could express it. Even with the boy, nothing in life seemed worth much. Celia had been, and indeed still was, everything to him, and the wreck she had made of his life counted for nothing beside the recollection of what she had once been in it in spite of all her selfishness, and caprice, and coldness to him. She had been his wife! the one being to whom his man's nature had ever expanded—the only woman who had been to him the embodiment of beauty and delight. He pictured her now to himself in a hundred different ways as he had so often seen her—now wayward, now yielding; sometimes

haughty and disdainful ; at other times winning and bright ; always beautiful, always his own ! and yet—never his in reality, for she had said that her heart had always been given to Alaric Watson, and he—Mark—had never possessed anything but a shadow—a mocking, mocking shadow ! As he sat there meditating, racked with memories which were in themselves tortures, he recalled suddenly an evening when their boy had been only a few weeks old, when Celia was at her best—touched for a brief moment with the divine mother-love, and forgetful for the time of herself. They had dismissed the nurse, and for sheer fun had undressed and bathed the boy themselves, both laughing over their clumsiness with the slippery bit of humanity, and thankful when at length it was successfully put to sleep without any dreadful dislocation of its over-supple limbs, or any distracting cries for its accustomed nurse.

Celia had sat just as Linda was sitting now. Yes, just there! Her arms, with the sleeves of her dress rolled up, so as to be out of the way of the water—white, soft, round arms that he loved to hold round his own neck and to feel their warmth and sweetness, and which now he would give all he possessed to secure once more.

The lamp was very low and the fire was sending out fitful gleams of red flickering light on the child's cot, beside which Linda was sitting, her figure half in shadow—only her arm showed strong and clear as it lay along the rail of the cot. Her head was bent over it watching the sleeping boy, her mind abstracted in deep thought.

Suddenly she felt a light touch on her arm—a light, warm, caressing touch of fingers passed along the fine soft skin, producing a thrill of strange mysterious sensation, which deprived her for the instant of all power

of resistance or of analysis. The next minute she was conscious of nothing but the amazing fact that Mark's arms were round her, that her face was being pressed close to his, and that he was raining kisses—passionate lover's kisses—on her passive mouth.

Swept off her feet by the suddenness of it all, she could not collect her thoughts nor realise any facts but those which her senses made plain to herself, which in a nature like hers could not lie.

She knew now that she loved him, and the moment of delirium was one of sublimest ecstasy to her.

When for their lack of breath he paused for a second in his frenzied seizure of her, she took his head between her trembling hands and looked him full in the face.

‘Mark!’ she whispered under her breath, ‘Mark! do you love me?’

Her earnest truth-compelling gaze went right through his soul, and checked his passion.

‘Do *you* love *me*, Linda?’ he faltered.

‘With all my soul, if I have one!’ was her fervent reply, and her words sent a shiver through him as he recalled having made the very same declaration to Celia at Crowbridge on the day of his engagement to her. Coming from other lips, and those of a woman spoken to himself, they gave him a violent shock, and in a bewildered, helpless way he looked down at the woman’s face, now lying back on his arm, and tried to think what had happened. For although he knew it was Linda’s, he could hardly have recognised it; it was transfigured with a sudden joy that had melted all the lines and softened the features which usually looked hard and severe. ‘The she-boy,’ Celia had always called her.

This was no ‘boy’s’ face: it bore the im-

press of a divine illumination, and with a pang that nearly caused him to reel, he comprehended that Linda loved him as a woman, and that he had caused her to betray the fact.

‘Do you really love me, dear?’ he asked, in a dazed sort of way, hoping in a desperate, forlorn manner that she too had been attacked by a sudden uncontrollable impulse, and would answer this time, ‘No; only as a friend, as I always have done.’ But—

‘Why ask me?’ she answered simply. ‘Can’t you see?’

And then suddenly she turned her face downwards on his arm, and whispered shyly,

‘I didn’t know how much till now.’

The psychological moment had not yet passed away sufficiently for him to have regained complete self-possession, or for a reaction to have set in with any force.

After a minute's silence, she looked up once more at him, and asked directly,

‘You love me, Mark? say it. Kiss me again.’

How could he look down into those brown eyes, so full of newly-awakened hope, so beautiful in their frank avowal of love, and utter the brutal negative? But how could he tell her the truth or any part of it? How, indeed, frame words which should convey any idea at all of his feelings, or explain the case satisfactorily to her? They froze upon his lips, and died away in an inarticulate whisper, and for answer he bent his head down and kissed her again, but this time not as before. His mad passion had received a check, and all he felt now was a vague yearning for something in his life which he had not, a ‘longing-ache,’ which the sight of Linda’s arm had stirred, and which he knew was a heart-hunger that he was destined to suffer

all his life, unless, indeed, Linda could fill the void, and gratify partially his soul's need of love.

His more fraternal kiss satisfied her, however, and she was almost glad that he seemed calmer. Wholly unaccustomed to the symbols and degrees of love, she was incapable of discerning between affection and passion, and any demonstration of emotion was enough for her at this stage. Later on she might criticise, now she could only luxuriate.

‘Are you dreadfully disappointed in me?’ she asked next.

‘Why? how?’ he said, puzzled.

‘I always despised—this sort of thing! You thought me superior to that kind of foolishness, didn’t you? I did! Oh, Mark, does it make you happy to know that—that I love you?’

‘Yes, yes, dear, I know it will. But, Linda,

you haven't loved me long, have you? it came quite suddenly, didn't it?'

His voice would, to a more practised ear than hers, have betrayed a certain feverish anxiety, an anxiety born of a vague hope that the sudden fit which had seized him might have been of the same nature in her case, and that she would wake up to find it all a delusion, a dream, an unreality.

'I suppose I must have loved you all along,' she answered, quite simply; 'I don't think I could feel as I do all in a moment, and only because you kissed me. Mark! what made you? like that, all of a sudden.

He averted his eyes; the situation was becoming one of torture to him, and he longed to end it.

'I—I—don't know,' he stammered; 'I don't think I can quite understand it all yet. Let me go home now, dear; I—I—must think it out.'

He gently raised her with his arm, so that she stood upright, and he disengaged his hand from hers.

She looked a little puzzled, and some of the glory had died out of her eyes, but she could not mistrust although she might not comprehend him; and so putting her arm through his, she turned him round to Leo's bed, and bent her head over the child to see him sleeping now peacefully.

'He is going to be all right,' she said, looking back at Mark with a bright smile. 'Dear little man, how glad I am I have care of him for you; he'll be a pledge till you come again. You'll come to-morrow, won't you?'

'Yes, of course,' he replied, absently, thinking how glad he ought to be to have her loving care for his boy, and cursing himself for wishing even momentarily that it had been otherwise.

‘Good night, Linda,’ he said, putting his arm round her shoulder.

‘Good night,’ she answered quietly, lifting her head, and then with a swift gesture she flung her arms round his body, and whispered, eagerly—

‘Kiss me once more, Mark! Kiss me!’

For one brief second he held her in an embrace that was almost painful, for he crushed her slight, strong figure with his stronger arms, then suddenly letting her go, and dashed from the room.

She heard his footsteps pelt down the steep stone stairs and the front door slam, and she felt almost frightened at her own strange emotions.

He walked rapidly down the street, scarcely knowing whither. Mechanically his legs took him along the accustomed roads, but he walked aimlessly on, and for hours. His brain was in a whirl; he could not think

connectedly. A confused sense of misery and happiness battled within him, and in vain he asked himself what he had done? what he ought to have done? what he should do? The only thing that seemed clear at first was, what he had done. It was very certain he had made love to a woman whom not only he did not love, but whom he had never even looked upon as loveable. He was utterly different to Alec Watson, and had never indulged in what that young man called 'loving friendships.' Not only did he not believe in such unrealities between a man and a woman, but he would at any other period of his life have scorned to apply the word 'love' to any relation but the one, and in that one he had known only his wife, Celia. He could not comprehend how he had come to lose his self-control so utterly as to deceive a woman for whom he had so much genuine respect as he had for Linda.

He had always looked upon her very much as one of his own sex, and he relied on her judgment, her opinion, and, latterly, on the sympathy which she had given him in his trouble and dilemma.

As he walked, the cold night air and the exercise restored his physical balance, and his brain gradually cleared, the fog which had clouded his mental perception of things seemed to lift, and to leave him with a better appreciation of his position.

As to what he ought to have done! that was utterly beside the mark, since he had not done it. What he was to do now was the all absorbing thought, and one which occupied him fully for another hour, while he retraced his steps and wended his way to his own house.

It was nearly three o'clock when he reached home, and throwing off his clothes hastily, he flung himself wearily on to his bed, and

from sheer bodily exhaustion slept soundly until next morning.

When, as he awoke, the full solemnity of the situation was borne in upon him, he shuddered at the recollection of last night, and the prospect of what was inevitably before him. He dreaded going to see Linda again, and yet it must be faced. But how was he to go? As her lover or as her undeceiver? A weaker man than he would have quailed at the thought of having to give acute pain to a woman whose only fault was that she was not loveable to him individually, or he might have declined to face it, and might have taken refuge in flight, trusting to time and fate to heal the woman's wounded pride and love.

But Mark was not weak in either respect; he was only intensely undecided as to what would be the best and wisest course to

pursue—the best not only for himself but for Linda and for Leo.

There was no doubt that Linda made an excellent guardian to the boy, and her idea of life, and its aims and responsibilities, were so identical with Mark's own, that he could not make that an excuse to himself for breaking with her. It was a satisfaction to know that the boy would, if left in her charge, be brought up with what the father considered the true ideas of progress, with no false notions as to position, society, riches, worldly advancement. And last night had shown how skilful a nurse Linda could be, and how tender and womanly when the exigencies of the situation called it out in her. Towards himself, too, she had been amazingly responsive—as he recalled her last embrace, her whole look and manner, his heart stood still with terror, for then he could realise in a measure what would be her feelings if she

were told that he had simply been mad when he kissed her ; that he had no more intended to make love to her, Linda, than to Leo's nurse ; that she must learn the common fact that men were occasionally subject to attacks of sudden madness of this kind ; and that he, Mark, whom she had always respected, and now, alas ! loved, was an instance of this. Would she understand ? Would she forgive ? It was a bitter humiliation to have to confess such complete loss of self-control. To have acquired a self-mastery, which had been his strongest weapon, and to have thrown it away at the moment of all others, when it should have stood him in good stead ; it was a strange coincidence ! On the whole the experience was a useful one. It would save him from any false sense of security with regard to his own mental balance.

Still the problem remained, what to do ?

He could not only think of himself in the matter. The interests of Leo must be considered, no less than the happiness of Linda. He knew what her life had been ; how lonely, how loveless. Yet had he any right to cherish in her a feeling which he had accidentally awakened ? That it had been so awakened, seemed to him to be the more reason why he should not shelter himself behind his irresponsibility ; rather, that he should make her the only reparation in his power, and consider what would conduce to her truest happiness. The immediate question was therefore, Would she, when she learnt the true state of the case, release him ? or would she be satisfied with a husk, since it was not in his power to give her the kernel ? It was impossible to say—women were so difficult of comprehension. A woman in whom pride was stronger than love, would undoubtedly set him free ; but one whose

love swallowed up every other feeling, would gratefully accept the opportunity of proving the measure of her unselfish devotion. Of which kind was Linda? He could not tell.

Meanwhile, he thought he would write to her, and explain something of the strange situation, so that when they met again, it might be clear between them what each had to face. He would tell her quite frankly all that was in his mind, the decision should be left with her.

It was about ten o'clock when he sat down to write his letter. The first difficulty arose at the commencement of it.

'*My dear Linda,*' he began, as a matter of habit. Would this give her a shock? a chill?

He took another sheet.

'*My dearest—*'

No! he shuddered at using the same

epithet to her as he had been wont to use to Celia.

Do what he would, the terrible contrast kept thrusting itself before his mental vision, between the woman he loved and the one he had appeared to love.

It was no good. He must be brutal. After all, the roughest treatment is often the kindest in the end. If he destroyed her respect, he would kill her love ; and, since he could not reciprocate it, was it not better for her to have a dead love than a living torture ?

In a kind of frenzied despair, he seized another sheet of paper, and began without preface.

‘ You will think me a heartless wretch—a miserable scoundrel. You will never understand what occurred, nor how I loathe myself for it ; but, Linda, last night was a terrible, awful mistake. I was mad—insane

—when I kissed you like that. It was a moment such as may come to any man overcome by sudden recollections, and overmastered by association. I do not love you. I never did. I never shall love you. I respect and honour you, and I am grateful to you beyond words for all you are to Leo. But of your love, I am utterly unworthy, for I cannot return it—forgive—'

He wrote rapidly, and without pausing to think of grammar or style. He was hacking at a woman's heart. He could not stop to choose his weapon. The coarser, the blunter, the rougher it was, the more effectually it would do its dreadful work. As he wrote the word 'forgive,' the servant knocked at the door, and brought him a letter on a salver.

'This note, sir, please, and the boy is waiting for an answer.'

It was from Linda! Trembling from head to foot, he took it, and told the maid he would ring when he had the answer ready.

He could not read it with any eyes watching him, and he dreaded to open it, even when he was alone.

‘*My very dear Mark,*’ it began. He gave a gasp, and closed his eyes for a second, then he read on.

‘I can’t resist writing to tell you that *our* Leo is much better this morning! You didn’t say what time you would come, so I thought it would be a relief to you, to hear early how he was. I believe it was all that wonderful, beautiful love around him last night that helped to pull him through. Oh, my dear, my dear, what is it you have done to me? I could not sleep last night for sheer joy! Think of that, Mark! I who have never known what joy was, never tasted the ecstasy of love before! All my former bitter, lonely life seems to have rolled away like a cloud before the dawn, and you, Mark, are my sun, illuminating everything, and making life henceforward

a miracle of beauty. Oh, it is true! No one is alive, truly, until they have loved. I live to-day for the first time! Come soon, dearest, and hold me in your strong arms, and kiss me on my new birthday, and tell me, again and again, that you love me, and that you love me to love you. We shall be so happy, Mark! All your sorrow and wretched loneliness will be compensated for now, and you, and I, and the boy, will be such a trio! Do you recognise your "comrade Linda" in this letter? Ah, no! That Linda is no more. *You* have brought into existence another woman—a real *woman*, and one who signs herself this glorious morning, your living, loving,

‘LINDA.’

When he came to the end he heaved a terrible sigh, and flung down the letter on the table.

How could he send that letter of his as an answer to this one? As easily could he have slain his own child.

How often had he derided the notion that circumstances could ever be stronger than a man's character, yet here was a circumstance which utterly defied him and made him feel for once that he was only a tool in its hands.

Seizing his pen once more, he dashed off these few words—

‘I am so grateful to you for letting me know about Leo. I can never repay you for your goodness to him and to me. Oh! my dear, how much I desire to make you happy, I cannot tell you. I will be with you early this afternoon, but cannot stay long, as I have some important work to finish.

‘Auf wiedersehn,

‘MARK.’

He thrust it into an envelope and directed it to ‘Miss Linda Grey,’ and ringing the bell, he gave it to the maid.

‘It’s no good ; it’s fate !’ he said to himself when he heard the front door shut and the boy’s footsteps patter along the pavement ; and knitting his brows together, he took up all his abortive attempts at letters to Linda and pushed them with a vehement gesture into the hottest part of the fire. Then he put on his hat and went for a walk to steady his brain and to give himself some chance of self-possession before he faced the ordeal of seeing Linda and receiving her renewed assurances of love.

CHAPTER XXV

‘ Ah ! the wind shakes
The withered leaves, and Love awakes,
And to the vacant landscape cries again,
“ Ah Heaven ! to have her at my side again.” ’
(*The Lonely Landscape.*)—ANON.

MARK was fully occupied during the whole day and fairly able to dismiss the thought of his personal affairs.

When the evening came, and with it the necessity for recalling to his mind the events of the previous day, he felt wretched once more. Mechanically he sat down to a simple meal which had been prepared for him and which he tried to eat. The food choked him, and after a few mouthfuls he pushed away his plate and gave himself up to reconsideration of the problem of Linda.

He took out his watch and saw that he could lawfully postpone his visit for another half-hour. But would it not be better to get it over? to face boldly the unwelcome task, and feel that it was behind and not before him.

As he mused, in miserable indecision, he became all at once conscious that a cab had driven up to the door; the bell had rung and been answered, and a voice in the hall was asking for him.

‘He is in the dining-room, ma’am,’ he heard the servant say, and the next moment the door was flung open, closed again as rapidly, and, to the utter bewilderment of his senses, Celia stood before him, leaning back against the door as if in need of support.

He sprang to his feet and looked at her in dismay. It was a wreck of his former Celia. She had always looked slight, but well-covered and healthy in spite of her temporary

illnesses, while this was a mere shadow of herself. Fragile, haggard, wan, and with a wild, despairing look in her eyes, she almost forced a cry from Mark's lips, making him long to fold her in his arms and comfort her like a child that has strayed, and returned to its home at last.

But he realised that she must seek his love before he again dared give it to her; that her mere return to his house did not necessarily prove anything more than a weariness of her other experiment, or possibly only a temporary estrangement from the man she had chosen in preference to himself.

He went towards her with a calmness and an outward composure that betrayed none of the tumult of emotion within his heart, and said in a perfectly even voice—

‘Celia! you here! What is it? Won't you sit down?’

He took her gently by the arm and led her

to a chair, and she sank into it in a helpless, dazed kind of way, as if his manner confused her and deprived her of all power of speech.

She began, with trembling fingers, to unpin her veil and to unfasten the heavy cloak that covered her. He took it from her without speaking and threw it over the sofa. When he turned again to her she was struggling painfully to get her breath, and was evidently suffering physically.

He bent over her and half carried, half led her to the sofa, where she lay exhausted and faint, the sudden paroxysm of pain having passed for the moment.

‘What can I get you, my poor child?’ he said tenderly, laying his hand lightly on hers and starting at its feverish touch. ‘Is there anything you would like me to do for you?’

She fixed her large eyes, once so bright and merry, upon his face with wistful inquiry.

‘Some brandy,’ she murmured wearily, closing her eyes again with a heavy sigh.

He rang the bell and desired the maid to bring it, feeling, as he used the words ‘for Mrs Sergison,’ a kind of exultation at their sound.

It was good to have her once more in his life, even though it might be but temporarily. He longed for some explanation of her sudden return, but would not ask for it. He sat in silence beside her until the brandy was brought, which he poured out and held towards her.

‘Lift me up,’ she said helplessly ; ‘I can’t raise myself.’

She took a sip and then lay back on his arm, looking up at him with such a yearning expression that he hurriedly set down the glass and, taking both her small, wasted hands in his, said—

‘Dearest! you are very ill; you must see some one. Whom shall I send for?’

‘Oh, Mark!’ she sighed, ‘I don’t want any one but you, and you don’t want me! I can see you don’t; you hate me; it is quite natural.’

He would not let her finish. At her first words his heart gave a great leap, and in an instant all his doubts and fears were for evermore dispelled. Distressed though he could not but be at her appearance and her evident illness, he felt a rush of exultant joy and pride to think his love was at last rewarded and his devotion desired by her.

All his recent suffering and desolation rolled away like clouds before the sunrise, and he folded her in his arms in a silent, intense embrace that completely reassured her, and did away with all necessity for an explanation.

‘I am your wife still, am I not?’ Celia

said, after a little time, looking up shyly at him.

‘Of course, dear heart—always—always.’

‘But—legally I’m not, am I? When was it to be—I forget what it’s called; you know what I mean.’

‘Never mind all that; it is past and done with. Of course you are my wife still; even legally we are still bound, and in every other way more than ever.’

‘Shan’t we have to be remarried or anything?’ she asked, with an old return of her teasing manner that made him glad to see.

‘No, no! don’t talk about it, dearest. You must just get well again, and be yourself once more; you are looking terribly ill, poor child.’

‘I shall never get well, Mark,’ she said, gravely; ‘I have only come home—to die.’

‘Don’t!’ he said, in a tone of agonised entreaty. But she went on—

‘You can’t think how I’ve suffered; it has

been so dreadful—with—*him*. He never really loved me, Mark ; I was blind, mad to trust myself to him ; he was vain, and, oh, so selfish !’

‘ There, don’t talk about it,’ he quickly interrupted, seeing how flushed and excited she was getting, and not wishing to hear a painful story.

‘ But I must tell you, Mark ; you must hear ; you will think better of me than I deserve if I don’t.’

‘ Never mind ! I don’t want you to talk about it to-night ; it is enough for me to have you back. Let the past be forgotten.’

‘ Forgotten ! can it be ? Oh, no ! I can never forget the last six months. Mark ! why did you let me go away ? Why didn’t you tell me what he was like ?’

‘ Dear, how could I ?’

‘ Did it hurt you—much ?—my going away ?’

‘ I have forgotten everything now, Celia ; the present is all I know about.

‘ You are very good,’ she said, sighing again, and settling herself more comfortably on his arm.

He bent down and kissed her tenderly, as if she were his child rather than his wife, and said, in a different tone,

‘ But I really must send for a doctor for you. You would rather not have Hearne ?’

‘ No,’ she said, quickly ; ‘ anybody else.’ Then, as if struck by a sudden association of ideas, she asked,

‘ Where is Leo ?’

‘ With Linda Grey,’ he replied, avoiding her eyes, for the name brought back with swift sharpness the painful recollection of all that had recently happened, and with a pang of remorse, he pictured to himself Linda, waiting patiently, expectant, yet trustful.

He felt, nevertheless, comforted by the

thought that Celia's return would amply explain his non-appearance ; that the question of love which had so inopportunately arisen between them would thereby be placed in the region of the undesirable.

He next busied himself to find the name of a skilful doctor, to whom he despatched a note without delay.

He made the reluctant and somewhat suspicious maid light a fire in Celia's old room, carrying her up stairs himself in his arms, and laying her gently down on her own bed.

She shivered as she looked round the room, and now bare and dismantled of all that she had in her day added to it to lessen the ugliness of its original appearance.

The carpet was threadbare, and crude in colouring ; the window curtains limp and dingy, the ornaments on the chimneypiece antique and of early Victorian pattern.

Celia felt as if she had come to a strange room, and shut her eyes, murmuring feebly,

‘How wretched it all is!’

‘What is wretched, my dear one,’ said Mark; ‘are you in pain? Have you been long ill like this? How did you come?—alone?’

She shook her head, and answered, with evident effort,

‘No, *he* brought me to London. I have been ill almost since—I left you. It is all so wretched now, Mark. I hope I shall die soon.’

‘You won’t, dearest; you will get better very quickly now; you will have every care, and more love than you have ever had before.’

She gave his hand a faint pressure, and lay still, looking so terribly suffering and ill that he grew feverish with impatience for the doctor’s arrival.

When he did come, however, he brought but slender comfort to Mark.

The patient was very dangerously ill, he said; not hopelessly so, for she was young, and with care might ultimately recover; but he could not disguise the fact that the case was a very grave one, the lungs were congested; and the heart undoubtedly seriously affected; but with good nursing, complete rest, and unremitting watchfulness, she might live a few years. He was a brusque, skilful, busy man, not given to soft speeches or over sanguine opinions.

As he delivered himself of his gravely adverse opinion of Celia's case, he looked keenly at Mark to see what effect his words had, and was satisfied that, at any rate, here was a man who would appreciate candour and respect it.

Respect it indeed Mark did, but his heart was none the less heavy when he returned to his wife's bedside, realising that after all he

was in probability to lose what he had so long wanted. He seated himself beside her with an aching desire to hold her to life, and feeling as if the very intensity of his longing must of itself be sufficiently forceful to inspire her with fresh vitality.

Later on a nurse arrived, sent by the doctor, who insisted on taking entire charge of the patient.

Mark was therefore peremptorily dismissed from the sick room for the remainder of the night.

But no sleep came to him.

The events of the day, added to those of the previous evening, had been of too stirring and agitating a nature for the temporary oblivion of sleep to be possible ; and when the dawn broke he felt that the difficulty which must be faced that day was greater than ever, needing on his part the utmost tact and delicacy.

CHAPTER XXVI.

‘ The gold was gold
The little while it lasted ;
The dream was true,
Although its joy be blasted ;
That hour was mine,
Although so swift it hasted.’
(*A Song of Farewell*).—ANON.

MARK had been right in believing that Linda would wait for him in patient trustfulness.

But never had a day dragged with such unutterable sloth as that following the memorable night.

A dozen times she looked at the clock, calculating that Mark would come within the next hour.

Then, as the afternoon wore away, she knew that he had been detained, and that now she must not expect him until the evening.

Notwithstanding the hourly disappointment on the score of his non-arrival, Linda was remarkably, strangely happy. Never in her life had she felt so light of heart, so warm, so fully alive.

Leo was better, and Linda longed to be able to sing aloud her joy and exultation.

It was an unlooked-for happiness that Mark, the friend of years and her dearest companion, should have actually revealed himself to her in this sudden way as her lover. The recollection of her sensation as he had held her in his strong arms, the thrill that his kiss had given her, came over her frequently during her household occupations, causing her to pause and think afresh of the wonderful occurrence.

She knew now that no woman was truly alive until she had known the ecstasy of human love. Linda felt that her self-consciousness was increased tenfold, and she

thought with pity almost amounting to contempt of her former attitude of mind towards love. It seemed then but weakness and folly, if not actually a degradation, to surrender to the emotion. Now she saw that it would be a degradation to her love to destroy it or to treat it with anything less than the honour of which it was worthy.

Once during the day the sight of her own face reflected in a mirror startled her. Even to her own eyes she seemed to have altered since the day before, and she smiled back happily to the new Linda, murmuring softly—

‘It is all his doing!’

Leo was put early to sleep, and the woman who came in to do the daily work dismissed. Mark could scarcely come later than nine o’clock, thought Linda; and she took a piece of work and resolutely set herself to it meanwhile, to kill the time.

She found it difficult to fix her attention on her occupation ; her eyes would stray to the clock, and her ears strained to catch the first sound of the longed-for footsteps.

The street door below opened and shut frequently, quickening her pulses each time with expectation. But the footsteps stopped invariably at the first or second floors, and Linda sighed with fast ebbing patience.

At last she heard a heavier tread than the others ; it was coming slowly, but with even steps, all the way up. Yes ; surely it had passed the fourth landing. It was no mistake this time. Only Mark came up in that unhesitating manner. Her heart beat painfully, and she folded up her work with trembling hands, struggling to keep outwardly calm, and wishing to behave in every way normally. When—what had happened ? The footsteps had paused ! Rat tat ! on they came again. Oh ! cruel mockery. It was

only the postman trudging wearily up those hundred and eight stairs on his nightly rounds. Sick with disappointment and furious at her own childish eagerness, Linda snatched up her work again and listened apathetically to the postman's retreating footsteps as they tramped down in the same dogged way. After this the whole building was quiet, and the clock ticked away the hour past which she knew Mark would not come.

At eleven she sighed heavily, and once more folded up her work.

'He has been prevented from coming. I wonder he did not telegraph or write.'

She was not given to fancying disasters, and she did not doubt her lover. He would have come if he could. Of that she felt certain.

She went to bed, and, inspired with the hope of early love, she slept soundly and in happy confidence for the morrow.

She fully expected to hear by the first post in the morning from Mark, but again she was fated to be disappointed. There was no letter from him to say why he had not come.

She began to fear that he had met with an accident, and was meditating sending round to inquire at his house, when a quick knock came at her door.

Linda was holding Leo, and sent the woman to open it.

‘It’s ’im,’ was the laconic announcement, and Linda could not forbear a smile at the distinctive monosyllable. ‘Him’ being sufficient designation for one so all important to two at least of the inmates of that little flat.

‘Come and take the child,’ cried Linda, hastily divesting herself of a large apron which, with sudden vanity, she felt to be unsuitable to the occasion.

She opened the door of the sitting-room

quickly, and went eagerly forward to greet her visitor, her arms stretched out in natural emphasis of the glad relief expressed on her face.

Outside there was a dense, choking fog which filled the room. A lamp stood on the table in the corner burning red and dim in the yellow atmosphere. Mark's face was almost in shadow, but Linda could see enough of it to make her start back with dismay.

'Why did you not come yesterday?' she began.

'Linda—I couldn't—I was prevented,' he said, taking her hands, and holding her some little distance from him, in a firm grasp that was almost painful.

It was so much harder to tell her the facts than he had anticipated; and a saying of Celia's came back to him now with great force, making him shrink from the task

before him, 'To love a man is to put a weapon into his hands that he will certainly some day use against one.'

Linda was puzzled at his coldness—his manner altogether; but the truth was very far from her thoughts.

'I knew that,' she replied, simply. 'I was sure you would have come if you could.' Then, pressing closer to him, she added in a lower tone, 'It doesn't matter now, dear, that you are here. Mark! what is it? Won't you kiss me?'

Her face was close to his. If he kissed her now he could never tell her the truth about that former mistake of his, for to repeat the offence would be the act of a coward and a hypocrite. He had come intending to tell her at the outset that Celia had returned, hoping and believing that this circumstance would render any further explanation unnecessary.

Quickly drawing back his head, and trying still to hold her away from him, he said, hastily—

‘Linda—everything is different—since—the other night. Celia has come back.’

She dropped his hands, and stood a little distance off.

‘Celia!’ she echoed, in blankest astonishment.

‘What has she come back for? What—’

‘To stay for ever,’ he replied quietly. ‘She is terribly ill though—dangerously, I am afraid.’

‘But, Mark!’ said Linda, breathless with surprise, ‘how could she come back? How could she face you? after her betrayal of your love, your confidence. You have divorced her. She is—’

‘She is still my wife,’ he answered, interrupting her vehemence.

‘But the decree!’ urged she, ‘to-morrow?’

‘The decree is nothing,’ he said, impatiently. ‘The legal untying is as powerless to destroy a bond of love as the legal tie is to create it, Linda. The only decree that absolutely dissolves my marriage with Celia is death ; and that, I pray, may not be just yet.’

There was a pause, and he waited for Linda to speak again first.

For a few moments she stood dumb, bewildered with the suddenness of the blow to all her hopes, and not seeing anything before her but a blank future, as black and cheerless as the view from the window at which her eyes were now gazing absently. Then, as the recollection of his former loving manner swept over her, assisted by the magnetism of his presence, she flung her arms around him in a passion of longing, and said eagerly—

‘Mark, why should it make any differ-

ence? We love one another. What does it matter if—*she*—is there? She is not to you what I am now. Since the other night I have learnt so much, that I never even guessed before. I see now what we are to one another, what our friendship has led up to. And, oh, Mark! I can never tell you what your love is to me. Look at me! Don't I even look different? All day yesterday I felt as if I were treading on air. I longed to sing, to dance, to shout out loud how happy I was. Ah! don't take yourself out of my life, now that I have just let you into it! Hold me again as you did the other night. Tell me you love me just the same—'

'I can't!' he panted. 'Linda, I can't! I must be faithful to Celia.'

'You can be—you shall be,' she cried, still clinging to him, and forcing him to look down into her eyes, glowing with love for him, alas!

‘You can be faithful to us both. You love us in different ways. I should never interfere with *her*. You cannot respect her any longer, Mark. She can have all your pity, all your chivalry, all your care in one sense. I only want your love, Mark, as you gave it me the other night. Oh, think what my life is ; how lonely, how loveless. Take Leo if you must—if his mother wants him again—but stay yourself in my life, Mark ! Say it again—say I am everything to you ! Ah, do.’

He had never dreamt of this ; never fully realised what the yielding of a proud, self-contained woman meant in all its intensity. The sight of Linda, transfigured with passionate pleading for what, if he could reconcile it to his conscience, she imagined him to be only too willing to give, filled him with dismay. The fact was plain to him in all its humiliating force, that a man is a mere slave

to his physical nature, and that he was as unable now to recall the emotion he had expressed so falsely, as he had then been to restrain it. All her warmth and earnestness only petrified him. He felt he must face the truth, and confess the weakness of which he had been guilty.

Had he been legally free, he knew that he should probably have yielded to the temptation offered to him of Linda's love, and he would have felt justified in keeping alight a fire by which he had merely intended to warm himself.

He believed that in time he would have grown very fond of Linda. He was already dependent on her intellectual sympathy, and with all hope of regaining Celia gone, he could have reconciled it with his ideas of fidelity to make a second attempt at love. But now that Celia was back in his life, and appealing more strongly to him than ever

in every way, it was another matter to satisfy Linda.

The more he thought of Celia the less he felt able to think of Linda. The two could never mingle in his life, even though kept entirely apart, and considered separately. His own instincts were strongly monogamous in spite of his abstract theory of sex freedom. And instinct is ever stronger than reason. Alas! he felt now the moment had come for using that cruel weapon, and he shrank from inflicting the pain he knew he must give.

Throwing back his head, he drew himself up an inch in height, and gently disengaged her arms from their embrace of him. With an effort he controlled his voice, and said very quietly,

‘Linda, I have a dreadful thing to confess to you. I know I deserve your scorn—perhaps I shall earn your hatred. But I respect you too much not to be true.’

She put out her hand to him in a quick gesture of appeal, as if half fearful of what he was going to say, yet in truth not guessing it aright.

He went on, gaining courage as he spoke, and averting his eyes from her entreating face.

‘You know how much your friendship has always been to me, Linda, how I have valued and depended on your sympathy, your judgment, and your help in my work. You know, too, something of what my life was during my marriage, and of the awful loneliness that I felt when—when my trouble came.’ Again he stopped—the final avowal was so hard !

‘Go on,’ she said, in a quick breathless way. ‘I know what you want to tell me.’

‘Do you ?’ he said, coming a step nearer to her, and wishing she would spare him the misery of going on further.

But she waited impatiently, and he drew his breath and continued.

‘If indeed you know, Linda, you will have some pity for me, for it is no small humiliation to confess such weakness. When, as I say, my trouble came to me, it upset me so completely, that as you know, until I went to America, I was not myself at all. And when I came back, and grew to care more for the boy, and to realise more fully what a wreck my life was, other thoughts and longings—human ones—possessed me, and then—that other night—dear’ (his voice dropped into a softer tone, and became almost pleading in its turn) ‘as you sat there—in the half-light—somehow, you represented to me what I was wanting, I felt as if I couldn’t live without something to love—something to warm my cheerless life again—a woman, Linda.’

With difficulty she restrained herself from

uttering the cry of pain, which his words, and their meaning, caused her, and she sat down on a low chair clenching her hands together, and waiting for him to finish.

He continued, half whispering his eager defence.

‘And you were so good, dear, so loving and responsive, it all helped to make the longing greater, and to increase my weakness. And then, when you told me you loved me with all your great grand nature, I felt at once what a mean hound I was—for, Linda, I never gave you what you thought I did. I realised it all when I got home that night. I tried to write it to you. I couldn’t—how could I? You won’t blame me for that, will you? I should have told you if—if I had come to see you last night; but if I had been free, I would have made what amends I could. I would have offered you all that I had to give you—if—’

‘Stop!’ she cried roughly—her face white to the lips, and all the radiance and glory replaced by a hard, strained look, that cut him to the heart to see. ‘Don’t insult me by saying any more. I understand it all. I have learnt something about men, that I didn’t know before—at least not to believe the truth of it. You only wanted—some one—*any one* in fact; and you think I should have been quite satisfied and happy to have stood in the place of that some one. You think perhaps that I too was moved by the same kind of impulse. Being lonely, and a woman, I wanted some one too—a *man* in fact, to love and care for! Is that what you thought?’ She gave a short laugh of scorn, which froze him, and roused his indignation, for, after all, she had not fully understood his case.

‘No, Linda,’ he said, trying to speak gently, out of pity for her. ‘You do me an

injustice. I knew what you were giving me, that made it so hard. Believe me. Ah, you shall believe that it is awful to me to know what I have done.'

He put out his hand, and attempted to take hers, but she repulsed him vehemently.

She had plucked from the tree of knowledge, and in consequence, had found herself driven from the gates of Paradise.

'Don't!' she cried fiercely. 'I won't have your pity! I am a woman who has learnt to live in self-reliance, and without the help or love of any man. Do you imagine I cannot do so now? Do you think because I was deceived'—

'Not wilfully, I do assure you,' he protested; but she curled her lips scornfully, and paid no heed to his excuse.

'When I find I have trusted to a man who is not to be trusted, I want no sympathy from any one. I shall not die of a broken heart,

Mark! My death shall never lie at your door! You were quite right to be honest to-day. Even if your wife had not come back, you would have had to tell me the truth. No friendship is worth lying for.'

'It isn't our friendship that I am arguing for, Linda,' he replied eagerly, for it is one thing to refuse a gift, and quite another to have it snatched away. 'We must always remain friends—surely, surely you won't refuse me that boon? Ah, don't punish me more than I deserve. Now, of course, you are justly angry with me. You wouldn't be you, if you were not offended—hurt—disgusted. I am myself. But in time, Linda—in time you will let me be your friend again, won't you? You will shew your forgiveness.'

'I have nothing to forgive,' she broke in with shortly, getting up from her chair, and walking over to the window, which still

presented the same hopeless, murky blackness of atmosphere outside, and turning her back upon him.

He looked after her sadly, despairingly. Should he ever regain her respect, her sympathy, her good opinion? If Celia were to die—the thought chilled him as it came into his mind with horrible conviction of its probability—if he were free to try and love Linda, would it be of any use? or had her love died at its birth? Time and fate alone could answer those questions. At present there was nothing for him to do but to bear her anger and accept his dismissal, and with a heavy heart he went towards the door and glanced once more around the little room where he had spent so many happy hours; where he had so often been cheered, strengthened, counselled by Linda's strong sympathetic interest and intelligent comprehension of all his work. It was like shutting

the door upon himself that led to a haven of rest and ease. And the fact that he was doing so from a conscientious motive and a desire to be true rather than happy, if happiness held the hand of selfishness, made him chafe at the misery it entailed both on himself and on Linda, and to wish fervently that things had not arrived at this *impasse*.

Linda heard him move towards the door, but she made no sign, and remained with her forehead pressed against the window-pane and her lips tightly drawn together, to prevent the faintest sound of her breaking heart from escaping them until he had gone.

‘Won’t you give me a parting word, just to give me hope for the future?’ he said plaintively with his hand still on the door. ‘Only shake hands once more, Linda!’

She turned round and faced him defiantly.

‘There is no reason why I shouldn’t shake

hands,' she answered bitterly ; ' one does that to the merest stranger.'

She held out her hand as she spoke, but he looked at her with deep pain in his eyes, and without another word he opened the door quietly and left her.

She heard the slow retreating footsteps drag wearily down stairs, and her lip quivered at the sound, bearing, as it did, loss and dreary lovelessness to her soul.

The lamp, which had been hastily relit on the appearance of the fog that morning and without having been retrimmed, sputtered and gurgled ominously, and with a quick movement, Linda went across and turned it out with a sharp click, ejaculating as she did so—

' There, poor thing, you too have just lasted twenty-four hours! You too have burnt yourself out!'

The fog was denser than ever, and the

room plunged in absolute darkness, for the fire burned black and dim, giving no light and but little warmth. Linda sat on in the miserable gloom too proud to cry—too wretched to move.

Presently a sound from the other room roused her, and she remembered that Leo was in existence and still dependent on her for all the love and brightness he could have in his poor little life. The thought gave her instant courage, and dashing away the tears that stood unshed in her eyes, she went to the child and found him in open rebellion at the old woman's futile attempts to administer some medicine.

She took him in her arms with greater tenderness than ever, and instantly he stopped crying, and looked up wonderingly into her face, as if he discerned her trouble, and would fain have comforted her.

His sympathy was the last straw in her cup of anguish. It was the angel that stood barring the way to Eden. The love of this child, his sweet clinging dependence on her, had called out the mother-instinct in her heart which her newly awakened love for Mark had intensified.

Now the love had been wrenched from her, and with it all hope of the holiest instinct in her nature finding its lawful gratification. A mother robbed of her child is less of an object of pity than the woman who has had a vision of maternal joys opened to her only to be destroyed again as soon as beheld, and with a cry that would have wrung Mark's heart if he could have heard it, Linda hastily laid the boy down on the bed and called to the woman to come back to him.

She felt she would never regain her self-control now if once she gave way while this

agonising mood was upon her ; hurriedly throwing on a cloak and hat, she dashed from the house and plunged recklessly into the impenetrable fog.

CHAPTER XXVII

“ Look long, and longing eyes and look in vain,
Strain idly, aching heart, and yet be wise,
And hope no more for things to come again
That thou beheldest once with careless eyes ;
Like a new-waken'd man thou art, who tries
To dream again the dream that made him glad,
When in his arms his loving love he had.”

—WILLIAM MORRIS.

WHEN Mark reached home he found that the improvement which had set in before he left Celia to go to Linda had not been maintained. He was refused admittance to the sick-room on the score of exciting the patient, and he roamed desolately about the house. Everything seemed to be going from him ; he had lost his best friend, and his wife was dying.

There was no concealing that fact, and towards evening the doctor avowed it.

Mark was no longer kept away from her. Although powerless to alleviate her sufferings, which had become every hour more acute, he remained close beside her, holding her in the only position that afforded her relief in breathing. Now and then, in the interval of a spasm, she would try and speak, but her words were almost inaudible, and he could only by the greatest effort distinguish them.

Once he fancied she asked for Leo. He told her that he was recovering from a croup attack, and could not be brought out, and she seemed satisfied.

At length, after a longer interval than usual between the spasms, she rallied a little, and opening her large blue eyes, still childish, and more wistful than of old, she said to him—

‘ Shall you marry the She-boy ? ’

Adding, with a faint attempt at a smile,
‘ I’m not jealous now.’

Mark’s head was down on the pillow in an

instant, and his face buried in it, reluctant to answer the remark.

If only she knew what had passed between him and the poor 'She-boy!'

She required no answer, and as the pain threatened to return, she raised herself with a supreme effort, and whispered eagerly his name.

He sat up, and she leant against him.

'Don't let *him* pay anything—the costs'—

'No, no! my darling. I understand,' he answered quickly, appreciating her pride, which rebelled against being under an obligation to the man she now loathed, for his treatment of her.

For Alec Watson had proved that he was, as Celia had once said of him, 'not a man, but a machine for making women miserable.' Love he could never feel; vanity and a certain degree of emotion compassed his powers.

His own ease, his own comfort, his own pleasure, were his only loves, and any woman who ministered to those shared his affections. If, however, she interfered with them in any degree, if she demanded any sacrifice whatever from him, he at once threw her over.

Celia had attracted him more than any other woman, which simply meant that physically she appealed more to him than others had done. Her ready abandonment of husband, child, home, and friends for himself fed his vanity, and satisfied his taste for a time.

Her speedy illness, however, and her similarity to himself, destroyed the illusion before three months of the six had passed, which had to elapse ere he needed to face the possibility of marrying her.

They dragged out together a miserable time in Algiers, each week leaving them with a greater distance between them, Celia grow-

ing rapidly worse in health, and more scornful and difficult in temper.

At length she announced her intention of returning to London, secretly contemplating a reinstatement in her husband's home. Once removed from the irritation of Mark's dog-like devotion, Celia felt it had been a gift not lightly to discard ; his character, viewed from a distance, stood out in grand relief against the mean, worldly background of her former life. His unquestioning trust, his steadfast desire for her happiness, his utter self-abnegation and absence of petty spite or jealousy, appealed now to her as something hitherto unappreciated by her. And with characteristic desire to regain what she had herself thrown aside, she felt impatient to return to him.

Intensely relieved at this proposal of her's, Alec, towards the end, became more considerate for her. Like Celia, too, his vanity

received a fresh spur at the thought of losing her, and he made one more fair endeavour to re-awaken before they parted some spark of affection in her.

But Celia was the truer of the two ; and having once re-chosen the higher ideal of manhood, she repudiated the lower, maintaining to the last minute of their parting at Victoria, an icy demeanour towards Alec.

As she lay once more in Mark's arms, and realised the worth of Mark's love, she shrank from all recollection of that other, and the thought of his bearing any share of the costs of her mad folly was intolerable to her.

When she had received full assurance from Mark that he would obey her wishes in this peculiar respect, she felt satisfied to die.

Love, for her, was dead. She had given the little heart she possessed as a girl to the Austrian Count ; and all that passed for love as a woman to Alec. She had no desire

to live in perpetual penitence and sense of inferiority to Mark. She felt that, having healed the wound she had once inflicted, she had earned the privilege of dying in peace. Her husband's life could now be re-cast and probably shared by a more willing and a more congenial companion.

In life, Celia had not appreciated heroism ; in her death, she almost felt a heroine.

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About nine that evening she was seized with a violent paroxysm. Uttering a last sharp cry of 'Mark!' she fell back upon the pillow, her complex personality ended.

Death had forestalled the Law, and pronounced its 'Decree absolute.'

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Next morning a note was brought to Mark, which he mechanically opened, and read thus :

‘I am ashamed to think how completely I lost my “poise” yesterday. Forgive me! It is no crime to have shown you I loved you. I have struggled, and conquered. Trust me again, Mark, and believe that I am, the best thing a man can have—a steadfast and true friend.—LINDA.’

He covered his face with his hands, and remained deep in thought for some time. Then he roused himself, and going up-stairs he entered softly the room where Celia was lying wrapped in the garment of Silence. Bending over her he gazed long and earnestly into the face of his dead love, and questioned himself with newly awakened self-consciousness.

‘Was Rochart right? Did I only love my love of her? Was our marriage on a false basis, sympathy lacking? Is Friendship after all not higher than what passes for Love between men and women? Have

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we not a wider purpose in life than mere personal gratification ?

‘ Linda ? or Celia ? which represents the truest element in my life ? Which—?’

The door opened.

A whisper in his ear,

‘ Which wood will you have for the coffin, sir ?’ . . .

END OF VOL. III.



